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CANADIAN FILMS & TV
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James Whale's Frankensteins 2

RE-ANIMATING THE GREAT WAR
by Christiane Gerblinger

Going Na'vi 10

MASTERY IN AVATAR
by Robert Hyland

Méliès and Early Cinema 17

CONJURING THE SCIENCE-FICTION FILM GENRE
by Lukasz Boron

Postmodern Anxieties 22

RENAISSANCE: PARIS 2054 AS TECH-NOIR
by William B. Covey

Pop Star is the Medium is the Message 29

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH
by Milan Pribisic

TIFF 2010

SPECIAL TREATMENT/SANS QUEUE NI TÊTE 34

by Florence Jacobowitz

FILM SOCIALISME 37

JEAN-LUC GODARD AND THE CINEMA

by Richard Lippe

IN TRANSIT 39

KELLY REICHARDT'S MEEK'S CUTOFF

by Susan Morrison

AMIGO AND ROUTE IRISH 43

by Scott Forsyth

Television Discourse and Governmentality 48

CONSIDERING DA VINCI'S INQUEST
AND DA VINCI'S CITY HALL AS CITIZEN PROJECTS
by Michael Thorn

Black Christmas 58

THE SLASHER FILM WAS MADE IN CANADA
by Sara Constantineau

What's So Funny About Class Struggle? 64

IDEOLOGY IN THE TROTSKY
by MATTHEW FLISFEDER

CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2010 68

by Robert K. Lightning



2



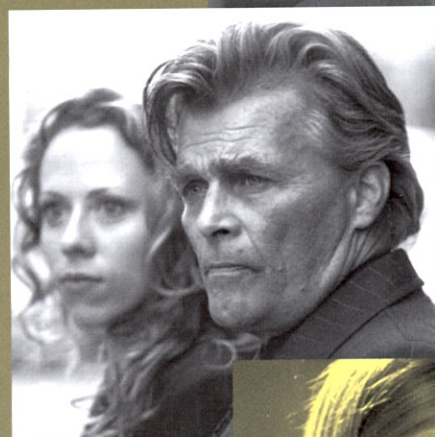
10



22



34



48



58

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STILLS: Thanks to TIFF FRONT COVER: *Bride of Frankenstein* BACK COVER: *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, *Avatar*

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IN THIS ISSUE

This issue covers a wide selection of films and includes reports and reviews from two festivals:

SCIENCE FICTION Science Fiction films comprise one of the oldest of cinematic genres. We received interesting submissions on many aspects of this long history, far more than could be included in this issue. Finally selected are essays on an interesting range of science fiction cinema. Lukasz Boron explores the generic origins of science fiction film in the magic, tricks and films of Méliès. Christiane Gerblinger offers a highly original consideration of Hollywood's iconic Frankenstein films. Milan Pribisic reconsiders the 70s classic, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. William Covey analyses the recent *Renaissance: Paris 2054* in relation to the foundational *Blade Runner* and Robert Hyland ideologically unpacks the latest technological expansion of the genre in *Avatar*.

CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION *CineAction* is dedicated to highlighting developments in Canadian cinema. A classic of Canadian horror, *Black Christmas*, the original slasher, is reconsidered from a Canadian perspective by Karen Constantineau. A recent Montreal comedy, *The Trotsky*, is politically challenged by Matthew Flisfeder. Canadian film scholars are increasingly expanding their exploration of Canadian image culture to include television. The two series featuring Canadian TV icon, Da Vinci, are examined in depth by Michael Thorn.

FESTIVALS This issue includes our annual feature in which the editors report on the experience and films of the *Toronto International Film Festival* for 2010. Robert Lightning represented this magazine at the *Cannes Film Festival* in 2010 and we include his report here.

This issue is double-numbered but the newsstand price remains the same as for a single issue; for subscribers, this issue will be just a single issue of your subscription.

—Scott Forsyth

ISSUE 84 CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS:

This issue celebrates Robin Wood's significant contribution to film criticism. The issue will include articles inspired by Robin's work. Contributions will be accepted until January 15.
Richard Lippe, 40 Alexander St., Suite 705, Toronto On, Canada M4Y 1B5 rlippe@yorku.ca

ISSUE 85 CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS:

The two themes selected for this issue of *CineAction* work off each other as two halves of the same coin. The first refers to a type of 'art film' that while seemingly minimalist, in fact requires intense audience concentration and effort to produce meaning; the other, films that have given audiences what they expect in entertainment but may have more to offer when closely observed and analyzed.

SLOW FILM By this neologism, I mean to draw an analogy between the recent phenomenon in cooking (and eating) habits termed the 'Slow Food' Movement wherein time functions as an arbiter and guarantor of good taste, with those films that work off similar emphases of duration, films that reject the flashier aspects of Hollywood filmmaking...short takes, rapid editing, continuously moving camera and action, etc... substituting instead a much slower approach to crafting a film. However, this theme is not limited to current filmmakers like Argentina's Lisandro Alonso, Canada's Denis Côté, or the US's Kelly Lynch. There is a rich history of 'slow film' amongst European and Asian filmmakers, too.

CROWD PLEASERS As with the Cahiers du Cinema crew who looked at American films and saw art, not just cheap entertainment, the intent of this theme is to look closely at the more popular products of recent Hollywood, films that may have been dismissed or overlooked by serious critics as objects worthy of attention. The question to be asked is, 'Is there anything there worth talking about?'

Papers should be submitted in hard copy only, mailed directly to Susan Morrison, the editor of this issue. Once accepted for publication, the paper will then be emailed as a file attachment. The deadline for submission is May 15, 2010. It would be appreciated if a brief proposal be submitted as early as possible as an indication of intention to submit. A style guide is available on our website www.cineaction.ca

Please address all queries and submissions to the issue's editor:

Susan Morrison, 314 Spadina Road, Toronto ON, Canada M5R 2V6 smorr@cineaction.ca

James Whale's **FRANKENSTEINS**

RE-ANIMATING THE GREAT WAR

by CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER

We feel as if something inside us, in our blood, has been switched on. That's not just a phrase—it is a fact. It is the front, that has made electrical contact... We are dead men with no feelings, who are able by some trick, some dangerous magic, to keep on running and keep on killing.¹

—Remarque, Erich Maria, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Vintage, Sydney, 1996, p. 38

The destruction wrought by World War One, its decline in human welfare and the lack of progress that became apparent as Europe began, once more, to mobilise for war were moulded, by British director James Whale, into perhaps the most significant film adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Moreover, Whale's films—*Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)—should be understood as narratives deriving from the two cataclysmic social crises of the time: the Great War and the post-war years leading up to the Great Depression. Through the prism of those events, Whale's monster is rendered a returning and mutilated soldier, in turn a Forgotten Man and the dispossessed citizen of a depressed economy. Merging these into the now iconic figure of Boris Karloff's monster, Whale's films are emblematic of the inertia of those inter-war years, with hope, reconstruction and progress foiled by the return of history. In establishing the significance of the Great War in Whale's adaptations, this essay also offers an analysis of some of the wider implications this influence brings with it², such as the deterioration of the human com-

munity and the individual's role within that community, as well as a comparison between Frankenstein's materials and a trope most apparent in German art of the period, namely, the production of destruction.

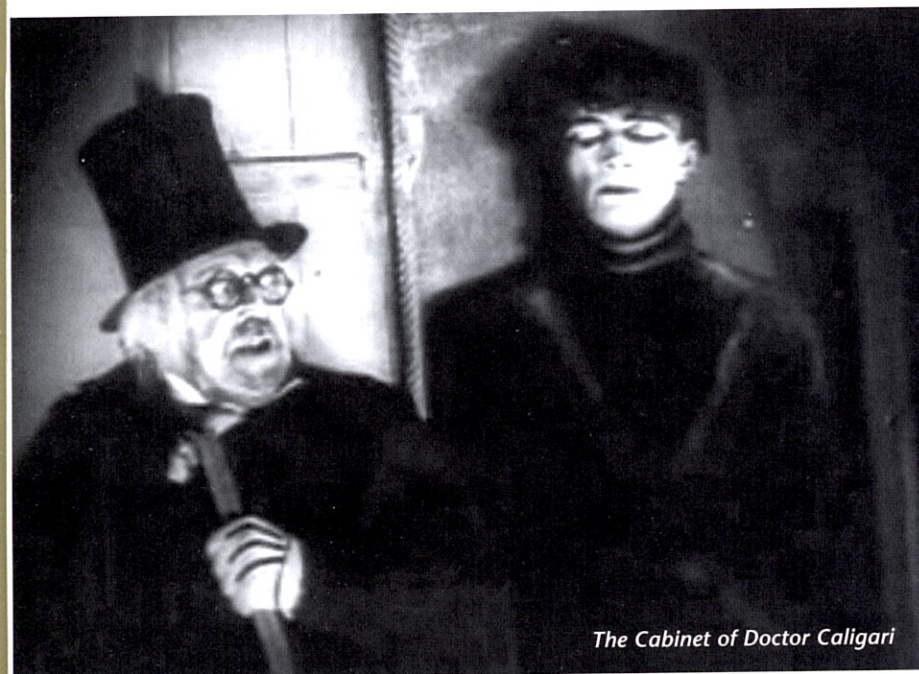
In this vein, the work of Otto Dix and Ernst Juenger is examined to shed light on Whale's theme of re-animation. Mary Shelley's original concept of a creature borne from the executed criminals paraded in nineteenth-century anatomy theatres easily anticipates the modern, capitalist notion that the destruction of war can generate production and profit. This kind of production utilises death in both procreative and economic terms. As pervasive as the metaphor has become, in Whale, the male scientist assumes a generative role in the laboratory, where his research and creation can be viewed as analogous to fighting on the battlefield. As I'll go on to elaborate by way of comparison with Dix and Juenger, both the laboratory and the battlefield should here be viewed as sites upon which death is regarded as the first step towards a new existence. Yet, as Whale indicates, any attainment of progress or of a new world simply returns the community to a harsher reality, a more unforgiving type of tradition and archetype than before.

As Steven Earl Forry has suggested, the events following World War One and preceding the Great Depression "validated some of the worst scenarios of the Frankenstein story... only in the twentieth century does the Frankenstein myth fully achieve its apocalyptic dimensions"³. From World War One onwards, popular culture began to depict machines as increasingly anthropomorphic, and humans as more mechanical. By the 1930s, technology and scientific progress had become increasingly accessible, both alleviating human function and exploiting it. Visualising and screening these new interpretations of science, Whale's films borrow heavily from contemporaneous notions of technology and its relationship to the





The Golem



The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari



Metropolis

human. A manufactured product in need of very little maintenance, Frankenstein's monster no longer reads Plutarch in the 1930s. Had Whale's monster been as erudite as Shelley's, he may have preferred Marx to Plutarch.

In the hundred years separating Shelley and Whale, several literary works had dealt with physical transformations that turned destruction and degeneration into something altogether more productive, most notably Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886), H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

Film adaptations and theatrical dramatisations also preceded Whale's *Frankenstein*, Dawley and Edison's representing the first (1910). In addition, the number of advertisements and comedies featuring electricity as it impacted on the human body appeared almost infinite⁴, revealing a fascination with the possibility of scientifically animating a body (or its component parts). Otto Rippert's *Homunculus* and Joseph W. Smiley's *Life Without Soul* (both 1916) were more sophisticated depictions of scientific creation, the latter even staking a claim for being the first feature-length version of Shelley's novel. While both enjoyed popularity at their time of release, the films that most influenced the look of Whale's *Frankenstein* were Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1914 and 1920), Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) and *Hands of Orlac* (1925) and, perhaps not surprisingly in its portrayal of technology pitted against archetypal values, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926)⁵. In his preparations for the design of *Frankenstein*, Whale not only viewed these films but reportedly singled out *Caligari* in order to watch it "over and over"⁶. *Caligari*'s similarity to Whale's *Frankenstein* is particularly suggestive when one considers that each screen doctor manipulates cadaverous men who continue to suffer the effects of past traumas.

In each of these German films, as in Whale's *Frankenstein*, the human is reduced and reconfigured as an automaton, a sort of monstrous humanoid. The Golem is a clay figure brought to life by a disaffected human community, Dr Caligari mesmerises a somnambulist in order to execute deeds that further his own fantasies, Orlac's hands are lost in an accident and replaced with the hands of a criminal, and Dr Rotwang creates a robot in the image of his rival's lover in *Metropolis*. The progression from *The Golem* to *Metropolis* also indicates a cinematic move from mythical narratives of alchemical resurrection to a more technology-driven approach to screening the business of science.

Significantly, in most of these narratives, as in *Frankenstein*, the human/robot hybrid is fragmented, inarticulate and physically impaired. From its first appearance in the theatre to Whale's two

works, unlike Shelley's creation, the monster has neither speech nor unlimited mobility. The transition seems to register disability and defect, rather than aptitude and proficiency; in other words, the emphasis seems to be on regression rather than progress; on lumbering re-animation rather than boundless vitality; on being more dead than alive⁷. What's implicit in this transition is the influence of the First World War, where science and technology are distinguished by soldiers' injuries and deformities, by tanks, by the use of chemical weapons, and by plastic surgery.

Furthermore, from Shelley to Whale there is also a shift in narrative focus; while the former largely focused on reconfiguring man as an idealised simulacrum of nature, the latter imagines the human community as an unforgiving mass positioned against the weakened, war-weary individual. As in Shelley's text, Whale's scientist is portrayed as a kind of artistic genius, but his environment is not a vitalising one from which he can draw strength, but a closely-knit and homogenous one. His monster, too, is mechanical, but Whale's characterisation infuses this robot-man with the added pathos of being largely mute⁸ and like an animal⁹. Although the creature could be viewed as the product of a modernist aesthetic that championed the image of the fragmented, simplified and mechanised human being—indeed, one imagines how Shelley's creation might have been depicted by Otto Dix or Fernand Léger—he is still relegated to the uncanny status of a monster. He is a dismembered, re-membered and re-animated man who has returned from the (many) dead, and who inspires a kind of xenophobic fear, rather than admiration, for his durable constitution.

To provide some context for this shift, it is useful to look at Whale's own involvement in the War, as well as the socio-economic and cultural milieu of the war and post-war years. Whale, the sixth of a Worcestershire blast-furnaceman's seven children, enlisted in the army in 1915 as an officer cadet, arriving at the Western Front in the summer of 1916 as a second lieutenant. According to Mark Gatiss, Whale's commission "was no mean feat for the son of a Dudley furnaceman, even allowing for the tremendously high casualty rate among junior officers on the Western Front"¹⁰. Whale rarely spoke of the war in later years, but it is understood that he was held by the Germans as a prisoner-of-war for most of its duration and that, while held captive, he directed a number of plays with his fellow prisoners. Whale eventually found fame on the London stage in 1928, when he directed *Journey's End*, "the greatest of all war plays", according to a contemporary critic¹¹. Its playwright, R.C. Sheriff, said of Whale that

... he had turned a hand of art to it. By strutting the roof with heavy timbers he gave an impression of vast weight above: an oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere with a terrifying sense of imprisonment for those who lived in it. Yet with this, through innumerable small details, he had given it a touch of crude romance that was fascinating and exhilarating. Above all it was real. There may never have been a dugout like this one: but any man who had lived in the trenches would say, "This is it: this is what it was like".¹²

Whale's war experiences clearly enabled him to reproduce its atmosphere in palpable detail. This suggests a sensibility capable of grasping the sensuous and paradoxical links that could be made when thinking about war—indeed, Sheriff's connection of a "terrifying sense of imprisonment" with "a romance that was fascinating and exhilarating" evokes the war's conflation of life and death. Whale's idiosyncratic treatment of Shelley's text also easily invites such contradictory comparisons in its allusion to the transformative, life-giving force of the war over its combatants.

Following his theatrical production of Sheriff's *Journey's End*, Whale continued to contextualise the war throughout much of his short career. He worked on *Hell's Angels* with Howard Hughes, a movie about the air force; filmed *Journey's End* and *Waterloo Bridge* in 1931; and the second of his horror quartet for Universal, *The Old Dark House*, made its lead character a cynical war veteran. In 1937, he filmed *The Road Back*, Remarque's sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. With the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda threatening to ban the studio's film if it did not agree to cut the scenes they deemed anti-German, Whale was so outraged the film had to be re-made with another director¹³. When filming began on *Frankenstein* in 1931, Whale re-used the outdoor sets for Universal's 1930 film adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. While this might be no more than an extraordinary coincidence, Whale must surely have recognised and exploited this material. In fact, Skal even goes so far as to suggest that the audiences themselves would have recognised the earlier film's sets and sub-consciously related the film to the war¹⁴.

I see no reason why Whale himself would not have seen similar connections and taken advantage of them. Casting Colin Clive, whom audiences had recently seen as Lieutenant Stanhope in the film version of *Journey's End*, in the role of Dr Frankenstein was another such connection. One might speculate that his presence in both films forged a connection with *Journey's End* and thus, inevitably, with the war. Maybe audiences even saw Clive, as Joanna Bourke says of the injured man in war, as "mutilated and mutilator in one"¹⁵—once a dying combatant, now an aggressive surgeon, amputating and grafting limbs to create a fitter race.

Clearly, connections abound, but none resonates more than the notion that the monster visually alludes to mutilation, war-time surgery, and the myth of the returning dead. As Whales' monster stumbles into Frankenstein's sitting room, many in the audience would have caught the reference to the rebirth of the fallen soldier, an emblem of sacrifice inserted into the film adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and seen some years earlier in Abel Gance's 1919 *J'accuse* (re-made in 1937). In his seminal examination of the cultural history of the Great War, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Jay Winter even describes the rising dead soldiers of Gance's film as "wrapped in tattered bandages, some limping, some blind walking with upraised arms, some stumbling like Frankenstein's monster"¹⁶. Surely, if such a comparison can be drawn decades later, why not in 1931, when the reference was still fresh?

The Great War gave rise to an enormously pervasive symbolism of re-animation and re-birth. Bernd Hüppauf, one of the most interesting commentators on war and violence, calls such regenerative symbolism a "civil religion", which was created, he continues,



House of Frankenstein

...around myths such as the revival of the great and powerful nation out of the sacrifice of the lives of its sons, the resurrection of the fallen warriors at the day of their nation's rebirth, or the powerful presence of soldiers who after they were shot dead continue to march and fight together with their living fellows, thereby making them invincible.¹⁷

Each of these myths contributed to raising the concept of death to a level where it could be expected and even desired, as well as to transforming "death into a higher form of life"¹⁸ in the popular imagination. Although the war and its purpose were, for many years, understood in starkly different terms by those at home and those fighting it at the front, it appears that the experience of violent death began to be rationalised as both beyond one's control and as merely another station of life, as the following statement by a young soldier implies: "I'll think of my future life as leave from death"¹⁹.

Images of re-animation and re-birth continued to prevail long after the war had ended. The idea that the war had achieved no aim or purpose was difficult to accept even for those who had been more or less inclined against it; as Remarque's hero Paul Bäumer says shortly before he falls, human life "cannot have collapsed in the shelling, the despair and the army brothels... as long as life is there it will make its own way, whether my conscious self likes it or not"²⁰. Whether one was a romantic or a pragmatist, it became necessary to believe that life had some kind of purpose even as it went on amidst and beyond death. Indeed, even as late as 1940, a survey was conducted to discover what kind of film ending the cinema-going public preferred. It found that "the majority of 577 people who responded said they like to see the dead heroes and heroines of the story marching off reborn"²¹, a happy end that promised a new beginning for the dead and fallen, implying a far better life beyond death.

Whale's *Frankenstein* begins with images of death (a funeral, a hanging and a dissection), and ends with a toast to an unborn "son of Frankenstein". Depicting a reversal of the life cycle and thus a movement from death to creation, the narrative proceeds in reverse by suggesting the emergence of birth from destruction. Like so much of the Great War's "civil religion", Whale's text is representative of a contemporaneous notion that the destruction wrought by the war could be viewed as a productive and even creative achievement.

In both Shelley's and Whale's *Frankensteins*, production emerges from destruction. As Bernd Hüppauf notes, Walter Benjamin was among the first to consider that destruction of the unprecedented scale of World War One had been transformed into capital, that, in other words, it had become a modern mode of production. Exploiting the materials made available through the war's devastation of private and public domains thus became a most profitable endeavour. In Benjamin's words, the losers' captured material was transformed into the winners' "Kulturgüter", their cultural commodities²². Hüppauf goes on to propose that the Great War

...turned battlefields into gigantic systems of production which, devoted to the destruction of lives, landscapes and material and symbolic goods, followed the rules of capitalist order more thoroughly than in times of peace.²³



Painting by Otto Dix



J'accuse



All Quiet on the Western Front

If capitalism and production can be said to be at their peak during wartime, then, under the terms proposed here, Frankenstein's birth thrives when death is at its most abundant. That is, Frankenstein's project of re-animation should similarly be viewed as linking plundered resources with a more or less productive outcome.

Like Whale, the German painter Otto Dix had also served in the Great War. Dix frequently portrayed the ruin of war as simply another phase in the growth of an organic nature. In her examination of Dix, Maria Tatar extends the transformation of one sphere's destruction into another's production to include the seizure of female function to create a parthenogenetic moment for the male. She argues that Dix's war paintings depict the "displacement of the female body" altogether, and convey "the appropriation of its biological functions through the creative energies of male autogeny", an appropriation that represents "a new order in which men engage in regeneration as they expire on the battlefields"²⁴. Dix himself proclaimed that "even war should be perceived as a natural occurrence" and that "all wars are waged over and because of the vulva"²⁵. With this claim, he suggests a decisive correlation between male combat and female reproductive capabilities; further, he suggests that the latter gives rise to the former.

Similarly, given the theme of generation in Mary Shelley's original, it could be claimed that Whale re-interprets the male destruction that takes place in his films' laboratory as both feminine and lucrative. This analogy appears to be a very common literal and visual motif during and following the war, particularly in German art. As in Lang's *Metropolis*, for instance, the union of femininity and capital emphasises destruction as sexually generative, even promiscuous. Given his admiration for German Expressionist film, it is interesting to consider that Whale's two *Frankensteins* may well be representative of a peculiarly German aesthetic; that the war's devastation can supply the material to deliver new life. If procreative generation can be said to be female then, in the context of mutilation and production, re-animation is its male equivalent. As Tatar states, making war was like "a second birth from a male parent"²⁶. In this way, the kind of birth performed by Frankenstein goes even further than the spiritual re-birth of Hüppauf's "civil religion" because it is corporeal.

Ernst Jünger, a German writer who had also served in the war, and who, even more than Dix, was pre-occupied with what he saw as the fecund creative powers of war, claimed in his autobiographical *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1922), "combat is not only destruction, but also the male form of generation"²⁷. In Whale's case, the male form of generation on the battlefield is reconfigured as re-animation in the laboratory, where the female is entirely subsumed into, and hybridised with, the male. Casting the effeminate Ernest Thesiger as Dr Pretorius in *Bride of Frankenstein* is thereby not so much an instance of one of the director's whimsical flourishes as a real indication that Whale understood the gender overlap of Shelley's original. We might even go so far as to say that he comprehended it more fully than Shelley herself—at least on a conscious level. Of course, this is impossible to establish definitively, but it is evident that Whale was aware that focussing on not just one but two male scientists would only emphasise Shelley's displacement of traditional procreative roles. Indeed,

Whale even has Henry lock the door to his bride Elizabeth's room on the day of their wedding, despite her begging him not to, so that he can be free to pursue his monster.

If Frankenstein's laboratory can be configured as a battlefield, a place where modern warfare is waged to bear new life, then we also see two further reversals; firstly, the dead and fallen are returned to life as a sturdier composite of their former selves and, secondly, the modern male destroyer or scientist takes on the function of female generation. Ironically, this potentially subversive process does not create innovation and progress, but manages merely to resurrect a phoenix made up of the same conflicts that preceded its creation. Unlike Hermann Hesse's idealistic image of revolution, of a world being "rent asunder" so that "it might be born anew"²⁸, Whale's film adaptations of Shelley's *Frankenstein* reflect a more pragmatic and cynical attitude towards the war, particularly *Bride of Frankenstein*, made three years after Hitler's rise to power. With all of its radical technology and its potentially subversive reversal of gender and death, re-animation is here moulded into a representation of proto-fascist homogeneity and resistance to progress.

Reading Whale's laboratory as a battlefield where re-animation creates not progress but regression also extends to the community and the environment outside it, to which the creature is returned. The hostility visited upon the creature by the community from which he essentially derives reflects a peculiar attitude towards returning soldiers. In Whale, the re-animated monster is not welcomed by this community upon his "return", nor is he re-humanised, as it were, through a process of re-integration, because the community sees him, not as their re-born son(s), but as an aberration, a grotesque impersonation of sacrifice. The attitude towards the returning soldier represents a paradox. It seems that, while claiming to want to "see the dead heroes and heroines of the story marching off re-born", the community was often threatened by their actual return.

At a time when 'the war to end all wars' looked to have resulted only in greater hardship for everyone, the creature's re-emergence from the dead destabilises the meaning of death and responsibility towards those who had sacrificed everything to protect their communities. In Abel Gance's 1917 *J'accuse*, for instance, the "villagers" run away from the reborn soldiers and are not, contrary to expectation, overjoyed to see their fallen sons once more. This, as Winter claims, is because they know that the soldiers have returned to see if their deaths have been worth the sacrifice, and have instead found "the pettiness of civilian life, the advantage being taken of soldiers' businesses, the infidelity of their wives"²⁹. Gance's villagers' guilt, the knowledge that the deaths have produced nothing apart from scavenging and greed, makes them flee in shame. Whale's monster shares the characteristics of Gance's soldiers—he is both innocent (repeatedly portrayed as a Christ-like figure) and wrathful, both sacrificed and repeatedly disappointed. Unlike the eventual amelioration of Gance's villagers, however, here we see a systematic refusal to treat the creature justly.

With its sweeping ability to de-personalise and homogenise those fighting it, the Great War reduced the body of the soldier to an atomised assembly of components. Joanna Bourke, in her examination of World War One and masculinity, claims that "[t]he male body was no more than the sum of its various parts



and the dismembered man became Everyman"³⁰. In addition to this potent and relevant image, "Everyman" also has several other meanings here. In the context of the 1930s, "Everyman" can also be understood as a term describing the broken and homeless citizen of a depressed economy. In terms of the community to which he is returned, mutilated and re-animated, the monster's alienation in Whale's text is due to him not only being "Everyman" (in that he is made from and reflects the human community), but no-man, an entirely new species without precedent. His monstrosity signals a return from abject destitution, which the community is unwilling to confront and which it rejects partly because of his conspicuous deformity but also, perhaps, because of its own indigence. As Bourke explains,

The sudden influx of disabled adult men...resulted in a transfer of resources. The shift was most effective in economic terms, as wounded ex-servicemen were given priority over disabled children...The disabled ex-serviceman was an indisputable part of the body-politic: he was male and enfranchised.³¹

But, she goes on,

...maimed ex-servicemen...rapidly lost their claim to special consideration. Indeed, the social status of disabled civilians deteriorated after the war partly because of the increased callousness and neglect towards the weak in general—even the heralded heroes back from the battlefields.³²

Frankenstein's monster thus represents another important emblem of the returning soldier; wounded and posing a potent threat to the villagers' dubious status quo.

David J. Skal has suggested that "the Frankenstein monster is a poignant symbol for an army of abject and abandoned laborers, down to his work clothes and asphalt-spreader's boots"³³. But, unlike Delacroix's Liberty leading the people, he is not their beacon but their object of scorn; at their hands, he is persecuted, imprisoned, crucified, tortured and incinerated. In his attempt to create a new social order by re-animating the dead and fallen, Frankenstein manages only to induce the community's slide into baser instincts, as well as his own entrenchment in the role of traditional, married and organically procreative union. So while the monster derives from and represents "Everyman", he is also rejected by a town that consists of "Everyman".

In light of the era under the discussion, and of the events following the Great War, James Whale's rustic villagers should themselves be viewed as representatives of an army of abject labourers (many of them old enough to have been World War One's Forgotten Men). By 1935, those roles are even more compounded in *Bride of Frankenstein*. The abject, impotent and unemployed mob has become a cogent assembly rejecting modernity in preference for the rather more fascist ideal of agrarianism and national inclusivity. This is further emphasised by the fact that the creature's re-emergence from the dead back to the city and countryside from which he came is not liberating. Following his initial incarceration in the cellar of Frankenstein's tower laboratory, the creature is plunged into an environment that has evidently never experienced change. Whereas Frankenstein's imminent marriage was to draw the

community together, the monster's appearance transforms the absurdly childish peasant-folk into a bloodthirsty mob, exchanging their dirndls and lederhosen for fedoras and pin-stripe suits. The abruptness of this turn both in fashion and attitudes suggests that this stage of the story firmly propels the villagers into Whale's present, and into the heart of another trauma: the Great Depression.

The monster can here again stand for the Everyman of this landscape, as the (fallen) soldier returned to his homeland's failing economy. The creature's emergence into this environment is a constantly de-humanising experience. Indeed, the atmosphere of the inter-war years (1928–34 being the official duration of the Great Depression) could be condensed into one contemporaneous, rather melodramatic reference: the monster's outstretched and pleading hands, which the director visually refers to repeatedly. Although not overtly identified with this association, the monster's hands represent the plea of the returning soldier who receives nothing from the administration that created his destitution: truly the "Forgotten Man"³⁴.

While Shelley's Frankenstein's refusal to meet his creature's requirements was portrayed as an abnegation of basic responsibilities, in Whale, this is transposed onto the villagers and their efforts at persecution. These instances of "increased callousness and neglect towards the weak in general"³⁵ grow in force and vehemence in the 1935 film. This suggests that it is the conduct of the masses being held up to scrutiny, not Frankenstein's irresponsibility, because Whale's emphasis seems to be overtly upon the mass positioned against the individual (echoes of *Metropolis* reverberate). Yet, rather than drawing a contrast between one and the other, he reveals their similarity, because the villagers' persecution of the monster is essentially an attempt to exorcise or suppress their own hopelessness. Fearing their own abjection (possibly at the hands of the aristocratic Frankensteins), the villagers render the monster abject, making him a victim whom they are justified to hate. A "Forgotten Man", the monster's destitution is turned against him so that he can be despised as a savage, a sub-human.

Like much of the art and popular culture inspired by the Great War, Whale's two films exhibit a substantial connection between the shattered physicalities of World War One, destruction and renewal. Just as Mary Shelley's idea of creation emerged from the medical dissection of executed criminals, Whale's vision of re-animation is a sutured amalgamation of traumas inflicted by subjecting the body to modern warfare. Whale develops this theme further by construing the traumas of the Great War and the Great Depression as plains upon which both the monster and the persecuting masses suffer hardship, loss and abjection, while the scientific elite stands to maintain absolute sovereignty in a broken economy. That is, by exerting complete domination over the way the human mechanism is created, Frankenstein not only utilises the very incidence of hardship by re-animating the dead, but also controls under what conditions his subjects exist.

In his focus on both the monster and the villagers, Whale indicates that re-animating the dead into a new life succeeds only in creating homogeneity and a complete lack of social progress. Passing from the abjection of the First World War to the desperation of the Great Depression, Whale's adaptations, like Shelley's own story of re-animation, register only a consolidation of the status quo and the fortification of tradition.

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Notes

- 1 Remarque, Erich Maria, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Vintage, Sydney, 1996, p. 38
- 2 In addition to Steven Earl Forry, quoted elsewhere in this article, the influence of the Great War on Whale has also been critically assessed by David J. Skal in *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, Plexus, London, 1993.
- 3 Forry, Steven Earl, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 93
- 4 Titles include *Dr Skinum* (1907), *Galvanic Fluid* (1908), *The Electric Policeman* (1909), *The Electric Leg* (1912), *The Electrified Hump* (1914) and so on.
- 5 In his biography of the director, Mark Gatiss notes that Whale screened these films "to acquaint himself with the German Expressionism he so admired. In addition, he watched MGM's 1926 *The Magician*, which contained the now-familiar elements of a tower laboratory and evil dwarf assistant" [Gatiss, Mark, *James Whale: A Biography; or, The Would-Be Gentleman*, Cassell, London, 1995, p. 72].
- 6 Curtis, James, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters*, Faber & Faber, London, 1998, p. 149
- 7 It is little wonder that one of the monster's few lines is "we belong dead".
- 8 The monster's lack of speech, according to James Curtis, was due to the screenwriter's intention to "further deny him any trace of humanity" [Curtis, 131].
- 9 This, indeed, seems to have partially shaped the monster's pathos. The script indicates that the creature's "first off-screen sound was to be haunting, piteous... like that of a lost animal" [Skal, 130]. It also, however, states that the creature "does not walk like a Robot". Clearly, he eventually did.
- 10 Gatiss, 4
- 11 Quoted in Gatiss, 31
- 12 Sheriff, R.C., *No Leading Lady: An Autobiography*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1968, pp. 47–8
- 13 Anger, Kenneth, *Hollywood Babylon II*, Arrow Books, London, 1986, p. 202
- 14 Skal, 136
- 15 Bourke, Joanna, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1996, p. 38
- 16 Winter, Jay, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European cultural history*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 15
- 17 Hüppauf, Bernd, "War and death: the experience of the First World War" in Hüppauf, Bernd and Mira Crouch (eds.), *Essays on Mortality*, Kensington Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences: The University of New South Wales, Kensington, 1985, p. 76
- 18 Ditto
- 19 Quoted in Hüppauf, 1985, p. 72
- 20 Remarque, p. 207
- 21 Winter, 142
- 22 Benjamin, Walter, "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen" in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1965, p. 83
- 23 Hüppauf, Bernd, "Modernity and Violence: Observations Concerning a Contradictory Relationship", in Hüppauf, Bernd (ed.), *War, Violence and the Modern Condition*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1997, p. 17
- 24 Tatar, Maria, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, p. 70
- 25 My translation; quoted in Conzelmann, Otto, *Der andere Dix*, Klett-Cotta, 1983, Stuttgart, p. 133
- 26 Tatar, 78
- 27 My translation; Jünger, Ernst, "Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis", in *Werke*, Band 5, Ernst Klett Verlag, Stuttgart, 1960, pp. 53–4
- 28 Hesse, Hermann, *Demian*, transl. W.J. Strachan, Panther: Granada, Great Britain, 1974, p. 153
- 29 Winter, 15
- 30 Bourke, 16
- 31 Ibid., 44–5
- 32 Ibid., 56
- 33 Skal, 159
- 34 Those intervening years saw a shift in the cinema's slowly increasing acknowledgement of the war and an almost complete avoidance of the Depression, with Mervyn LeRoy's *Gold Diggers of 1933* a notable exception. Like the image of the pleading monster, its number "My Forgotten Man" synthesises the war and the Depression in the figure of the disenfranchised returning soldier.
- 35 Bourke, 56

Going Na'vi

MASTERY IN AVATAR

by ROBERT HYLAND

I was saddened to notice the recent passing of Robin Wood, one of the driving forces behind twentieth century film criticism and of *CineAction!* Robin had been my teacher a few years ago, and during my graduate study we would occasionally meet for lunch. Conversation would inevitably turn to sexuality or identity, and it was through Robin that I truly began to appreciate how all cinema texts are political. Because of the way in which Robin came out of the closet, in a manner that consequently radically changed his life, the politics of gender and identity were ingrained into his worldview and subsequently everything became political. Even his choice of restaurant was political (more often than not in Toronto's gay village, where he chose to make his home), and naturally conversation would turn to film. Robin was a great critic of all films, not so much concerned in whether the film was good or bad but rather invested in reading the film as a political text. And so it is in the spirit of a late lunch with perhaps too much red wine that I find myself thinking of politics and questions of identity in James Cameron's latest visual spectacular, *Avatar*.

Avatar (Cameron, 2009), the first film to surpass the two billion dollar box office record mark, is a film that's popularity and appeal is derived predominantly from what Laura Mulvey described as *scopophillic* pleasure, or the pleasure in looking.¹ In the article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Mulvey argues 'The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure.'² While Mulvey was discussing the poetics of Hollywood formal style and the Classical Hollywood aesthetic, Cameron's *Avatar* uses the new 3D technology to further the pleasure in looking, expanding the film's hermetically sealed world further out to mingle with the audience's (false) perspective. But while classical Hollywood uses formal compositions to heighten the aesthetic pleasure of the female form and consequently subjugate the female body as object of male pleasure, so too does Cameron's three dimensional aesthetic spectacularize the female form and relegate it to passive object of beauty and thing to behold. The film takes pains to render in digital code a fully constructed image-space of visual wonder, but as both technology and nature are spoken of as the feminine, she





(the pseudo-natural world of 'Pandora' and the pixelated body of the native woman Neytiri) becomes a site of spectacular pleasure.

The film, on both the formal and narrative levels, is about mastery—mastery of technology, and mastery of nature. The film, while exploiting this new technology, tells a story that reaffirms ideologies which have not changed much in the 30 years since Mulvey's article appeared, and is a narrative of white male supremacy which reaffirms and normalizes patriarchal hegemony. While on the surface being a neo-liberal tale of eco warriors battling against corporate interests, when examined at the ideological level, the film in many ways promotes conservative attitudes and values in relation to education, identity and gender.

The film revolves around a recently wounded soldier Jake Sully, who is sent to a distant planet named Pandora to pilot an *avatar*, a human/alien hybrid creature that is designed to help humans infiltrate the population of native *Na'vi* who live on the planet and whose home is based upon a massive deposit of *unobtainium* a rich source of energy. Jake's recently deceased twin brother had originally been one of the *avatar* pilots, and as Jake has similar DNA, he too can 'link' with this particular *avatar* which had been cloned and therefore genetically

matched to his brother's (and subsequently Jake's) DNA. Jake, while paraplegic, must master, in this order: the (alien) body, nature, language, beasts, the woman and the *Na'vi* people. *Avatar* is a colonial control narrative in which the young white male continues to subordinate others as part of the filmic spectacle, thereby providing psychological pleasure to the dominant order.

Jake's Mastery of The Body

The character Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is presented as the agent of the film, and he is the principal watcher whose controlling gaze directs the film's action. The film begins with an off-screen narration over a short prologue image of flight over trees. The film cuts to black and then an extreme close-up of a single eye, opening. The camera cuts to two further shots of this eye and then a close-up of the face. This is Jake, and we are introduced to him through the symbol of the eye, and while he will become the film's protagonist we are presented with him first as an observer. His disability further positions him as observer, and like those seated in the auditorium, Jake too is a seated spectator of the action occurring around him, frustrated at society's belief in his no longer being able to perform as a



capable soldier and anxious to begin directing action in his own right. He becomes, then, the figure of identification for an audience who is also anxious to discover the new three dimensional film technology and realize new methods of controlling filmic action. But Jake's function as the avatar pilot is also that of observer, remotely controlling the avatar from far away in a sealed 'link-up pod' but discovering heightened sensory stimuli in this new method of interacting with the world (both the *avatar* and the new digital 3D cinema).

The world is presented textually, as a fully rendered three dimensional environment and it is in the depiction of Pandora that Cameron is at his best with the capabilities of depth that the three dimensionality allows. The film is a sophisticated metaphor for the new technologies the film itself exploits. Jake becomes the director of the camera's gaze, and it is through his perspective that we see the film and observe both the fantasy terrain of Pandora and the three dimensional virtuosity of Cameron's technological mastery.

While the avatars are controlled through a psychic/cerebral intellectual link between 'driver' and *avatar* body as vehicle, it is often noted that Sully is not one of the intellectual doctors/scientists who have traditionally been piloting the titular avatars (Na'vi/human hybrids). And yet while such piloting is purely cerebral, Sully proves himself to be a superior driver despite his lack of academic training. Sully is presented ambivalently. He is first and foremost presented as one of the marines, who in the film are considered bodily based functionaries in contradistinction from the egghead/weakling intellectuals. Sully states of his twin brother 'Yeah, Tommy was the scientist, me I'm just another dumb grunt going some place he's gonna regret.' However, despite his claiming to be a 'dumb grunt,' it is stated that Sully has 'a great brain with lots of activity.' His intelligence is also presented as being genetic and it is frequently remarked that Sully and his brother looked identical and had 'identical genomes'.

So Sully is a dualistic character, both physically as a twin and also symbolically being twinned with his avatar. He is both physically challenged, his body broken and confined to a wheelchair, but also physically capable as having been a former member of the elite marine corp and of having great control over the avatar's functioning and superior physicality. He is both presented as highly intelligent with strong cerebral activity, but also disdainful of the scientists and their scientific methodology.

Despite not having the use of his real legs, Jake is quick to master control over the *avatar* body. Indeed, mere moments after his initial 'link up,' he is off and running while his companions who have spent months training for this particular moment are barely able to control their fingers and toes. Jake is immediately presented as *exceptional* and while lacking in the sophisticated education and training that the scientists have, his natural abilities make him a superior avatar pilot than those who had spent a lifetime working toward the same moment. The 'dumb grunt,' through natural talent, becomes superior to the educated elite.³

Jake's natural talent and natural abilities are reinforced with him stating 'I can trust my body to know what to do' and it is precisely this innate bodily knowledge which the scientists lack and the film's ideology promotes—the myth of the pre-ordained and natural mastery of the attractive young white male.



Jake's Mastery of the Terrain

Jake's avatar, and those of Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) and his colleague Norm Spellman (Joel Moore) make their first tentative foray into the wilds of the alien planet Pandora, a lush garden of Eden where plants phosphoresce and giant beasts roam in harmony with the native Na'vi peoples. However, for the humans, Pandora turns out to be a hostile territory in which Jake and his human culture and sensibilities are severely disadvantaged. Jake quickly becomes separated from his sortie and he appears to be at the mercy of a pack of wild dog-like beasts but for the intervention of Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), one of the Na'vi, who comes to Jake's rescue and then admonishes him for his lack of understanding of the Pandoran natural world.

Under Neytiri's guidance, Jake learns how to navigate the terrain, how to survive among the native fauna as well as discovering he can literally plug into the wildlife and experience an interconnectedness to the Pandoran ecosystem. Jake, through Neytiri's assistance, gains mastery over the terrain. Yet, humans had already laid dominion over the terrain, through the process of naming. The film is ideologically neo-colonialist, and despite the scientists' study of the Na'vi language and culture, every part of the terrain is named in English—from the 'hallelujah



mountains,' to the 'home tree,' to the '*greatleopard*,' the entire planet of Pandora has been christened by the human explorers. While the anthropologists speak the language and Doctor Augustine was the first human/avatar to interact with the Na'vi people, the animals and places have been christened in English, appropriating these sites and subtly positing a naturalized Western/American ownership. Dr. Augustine, we are even told, literally 'wrote the book on Pandoran botany,' and presumably it was she who colonized the flora into American/English nomenclature and culture.

Even the Na'vi themselves are introduced as *humanoid* which posits a divine connection between humans and god (we're made in god's image) and therefore subjects the Na'vi to a hierarchy where humans are first (in God's image) and Na'vi are made in human image. Rather than positing parallel evolution where humans and Na'vi have similar traits, the choice of language posits the Na'vi are subordinate to human supremacy. So, through the process of naming, Jake and his fellow humans posit mastery over the terrain and the Na'vi themselves, subtly reasserting the dominant order as the natural order.

Jake's Mastery of the Na'vi Language and Culture

Jake, while living with Neytiri, begins to learn the language. While he has difficulty with the language, and often feels out of place with his linguistic ineptitude, he in time manages to effectively communicate and assimilate into their culture. While his friend Nathan had spent several years studying the Na'vi language, Sully must pick it up not through study, but through his own firsthand experiences. He states: (Learning) 'the language is a pain, but you know I figure it's like field stripping a weapon, just repetition, repetition.' Once again, education is presented as a boring waste of time and purely functional and subordinate

to 'real world' experience. Similarly, Jake finds the mundane aspects of scientific documentation (namely, the video blogging of his experiences) frustrating and pointless and in fact, it is his video blog which is later used against him to expose the failings of the scientific operation. Once again, the film, through its anti-educationalist attitude promotes innate natural abilities over scientific method, study and learning.

Clothing too becomes symbolic as the avatar body itself is a form of clothing or masquerade, and yet while piloting the avatar creatures (which are demonstrated to be empty shells who collapse when not 'linked' to their drivers), the avatars continue to be clothed in western/American style clothing (he in pseudo military fatigues, the others in the type of clothing that anthropologists are imagined to wear, khaki shorts and sleeveless vests). The very purpose of the avatar project is to blend and assimilate into the Na'vi tribes and so the wearing of western style clothing is a means of distancing the avatars from Na'vi and furthering the film's discourse of otherness. It is significant that once Jake is assimilated into the Na'vi he is forced to take on their clothing. He awkwardly walks into their circle dressed in a loin cloth, and yet as the avatar body is in itself a costume, why the need to feel awkward or embarrassed in the additional costuming of the Na'vi? He brings to his avatar his western sensibilities, but also the film displays for us our continued dis-ease in foreign custom and culture. We as audience participate in his awkwardness when our own mastery is put out of place and it is our discomfiture with the native-like clothing that Sully's performance actualizes.

Jake's Mastery over the Beasts

In his living with Neytiri, Jake learns how the Na'vi commune with animals and control the beasts for their benefit. The Na'vi have a

nodule on the end of their long braided queue, which when mated with that of another animal creates an intellectual connection where the two creatures commune through thought. The first time we see the viewers see this queue, Jake is seen playing with it in the scientist's training grounds. Dr. Augustine walks past, saying 'don't play with that, you'll go blind,' establishing the metaphor that the queue is a type of sexual organ. Jake will use this organ to gain mastery over the animals.

The sequence begins with a wide shot of the natural terrain and Neytiri leading a large six legged horse through a meadow. Cut to a mid-shot of Jake and the horse, and he states 'Easy boy,' to which Neytiri replies, 'Alae is female' and Jake responds, 'oh, okay, easy girl.' He clambers onto the horse's back and straddles the beast. She reaches up and takes a hold of a large antennae that is connected to the animal's head and hands it to Jake. The end of the antennae has a bulbous nodule in the shape of a large flower or vulva. The camera tracks slightly toward a mid two shot, and we see the vulva open up and something much like a flower's stamen begin to stretch outward toward Jake's queue, which similarly has moving stamen. As Jake brings his queue toward the horse's antennae/vulva the camera moves into a close up. The stamen connect, and his queue is drawn into the vulva. Cut to an extreme close up of the horse's eye open wide in shock, and then a mid-shot of the horse rearing. This becomes a peculiar metaphor for sexual conquest, and it is at this point that the film becomes misogynistic in its reinforcement in the belief of rape as a form of control. The film's ideology is that through their mental union, the two become connected, but the horse is at the service of the man. Furthermore, by gendering the horse, it becomes metaphorical of the woman Neytiri, who will later too become the helpmate of the hero. The horse's eye widening is symbolic of Jake's violation of the horse's mental/physical autonomy. Jake exhales vocally, and is told by Neytiri 'that is *zehalu*, the bond,' but through the imagery, it becomes clear that the bonding is not mutual or indeed a partnership, but rather perpetuates the myth that once a woman is raped she will become possessed by the rapist—that rape and mastery leads to love and obedience. Neytiri instructs Jake to command the horse to go forward, and he commands 'Forward' and the horse immediately surges forward. Jake tumbles off the horse, breaking the bond, but this cannot be seen as a moment of rebellion on the part of the horse. The horse performed what was commanded of it. Rather, this is representative of Jake's inexperience in this form of bonding. Jake falls to the mud and some other Na'vi warriors, seeing his inability to control his mare, laugh derisively, stating 'this alien will learn nothing,' and decrying his failure to continue to dominate his subjugated beast.

The notion of rape as method of control is furthered in a section in which Jake gains mastery over an *egran*, a large winged pterodactyl-like creature. The first time we see one, Jake is told 'do not look in her eye,' once again positioning animal as female. Neytiri continues, stating 'egran is not horse, once *zahelu* is made, *egran* will fly with only one hunter her whole life,' furthering the notion of rape as entitlement or rape as leading to possession. For Jake to fully become a member of the *Omaticaya* tribe of Na'vi, he must create *zahelu* with an *egran* of his own. He is told, 'you must choose your own *egran*, and she must choose you.' Jake asks 'how will I know if she chooses

me?' to which Neytiri replies 'she will try to kill you.' There is nothing in the entire congress between Na'vi and *egran* that is consensual, rather it is a forced battle to death or domination/subjugation. The film is committed to the notion that through mastery come possession and hegemony.

The scene is filled with violence and danger. Jake walks through the nest of *egran*, scaring a few away. One however, rears back and eyes Jake. Jake smiles and states 'let's dance' of course alluding to fighting as well as mating and courtship. Armed with only a bola, Jake first muzzles the creature, and then jumps onto its back. They have a struggle, where Jake is thrown off, but he climbs back on, gains control and using his hair-piece phallus quickly penetrates the *egran*. This time, however, rather than deriding him, the fellow Na'vi begin to cheer his act of conquest. Similarly to that of the bonding of the horse, again there is a close-up of the eye and again the eye is shown opening wide (opened with knowledge of possession?). The animal immediately becomes docile (resigned?), and panting while looking into the creature's eye Jake says 'that's right, you're mine,' again reaffirming the myth that as with rape and knowledge of another's intimate space comes entitlement, mastery and ownership. But it is also Jake's mastery of flight that begins his acceptance with the other male members of the Na'vi people who observe his conquering the beast and cheer his success. It is also through flying that he begins to seduce Neytiri through his natural abilities and talent.

Of The Woman

Neytiri is the first Na'vi whom Jake meets. She saves him from a pack of animals, although her rescue of him is presented ambivalently, she being a hostile rescuer. She glares at him and bares her teeth, symbolizing the castrating other. An imposing blue she-witch, her ethereal beauty is both attractive through its shapeliness and repulsive through its otherworldliness and the intimations of danger. Through her rescue of Jake, she displays better physical competence than he, and so the meta-narrative is for Jake to learn to be more capable in the terrain than she and restore the 'natural' order of his male supremacy. He does this through several ways, through learning to use his body in this new terrain, but also through his mastery over the various beasts. This culminates with his learning to fly the *egran*, and his skilful flying impresses her. One afternoon Jake and Neytiri are flying together, when suddenly they are attacked from above by a massive dragon-like creature. This is a raptor the scientists have christened *greatleoneoptrix* but which the Na'vi call *Tarouk* or 'last shadow'. Jake notices the raptor's shadow and screams 'dive,' alerting Neytiri to the danger. They dive and the *Tarouk* makes chase. Jake takes charge over Neytiri stating 'follow me,' leading the predatory bird into the forest canopy and into a trap. It is Jake's skilful flying that saves them, and it is through his newly found prowess as a skilled warrior that he takes control over the situation. Relieved, they laugh together and she displays her growing affection for him.

Later, at night, Jake is examining the mummified remains of a *Tarouk*. She explains to him how her grandfather's grandfather had been a legendary chief, *Tarouk Mactou*, rider of the *greatleoneoptrix* and that throughout their people's history, a *Tarouk* has only been ridden five times. It is this story that incidentally leads Jake to his later claiming mastery over the entire

Na'vi peoples. It is his eventual mastery over her culture that allows him to be adopted into the *Omaticaya* tribe of Na'vi. He has learned to adapt to the Na'vi lifestyle, and has even learned to better navigate her home terrain than she, and thus demonstrate to her his superiority and thereby exert his male dominance over her. She leads him into the 'home tree' a sort of organic databank repository of all of the experiences of the collective life on Pandora. She tells him that now that he has become *Omaticaya*, he may choose a woman. He informs her that he chooses her, although 'she must also choose me.' Despite her already being betrothed to Tsu'tey, the incumbent chief, she accepts Jake's offer, positing the superiority of Western love matches over alternative cultures of arranged marriage through bloodline and kinship ties. They then kiss in the human fashion, which then leads to their love making which, if anything like the conjugal possession of the Pandoran wildlife, suggests he again asserts his superiority and mastery over her. At this point, Jake hasn't just conquered any Na'vi woman, he has conquered the Na'vi par exemplar in that she is beautiful, desired by the succeder to chief, great-great granddaughter of a legendary chief, and daughter of the current *Omaticaya* chief and of the high priestess. He doesn't just take mastery over any old Na'vi, but the perfect most highly prized of all Na'vi. They make love (in an apparently conventional human way, coupled with kissing but no depiction of tail connections, although their hair braids are briefly seen dangling in the proximity of their crotches) and she states that they are now mated for life—both confirming heteronormative relationships as well as the prior rape mastery narrative of the animal possessions.

How to Dominate a People (*Omaticaya* tribe)

Having gone through the manhood ceremony of being welcomed into the *Omaticaya*, the Na'vi discover that he had betrayed them, having led the humans directly to the home tree. This results in his being banished, which then itself directly leads to him becoming the nominal leader of all the Na'vi tribes through his exceptional (human) abilities. What makes him different and distinct from the other Na'vi (his humanity) is what makes him superior.

His position as member of the Na'vi, is called into question when it is revealed that he has brought the 'sky people' to the tree of knowledge (their sacred symbol). He is attacked by Tsu'tey (Neytiri's betrothed) angry that Jake 'mated' with Neytiri. Jake easily pushes him aside, exerting his mastery over Tsu'tey in two ways, through his stronger sexual appeal and his superior physical prowess. However, the humans, impatient in their desire for the powerful 'unobtainium' destroy one of the trees sacred to the Na'vi people. Many die, and the Na'vi, and in particular Neytiri, feel betrayed by Jake.

After having betrayed the Na'vi, he formulates a daring plan to inspire and lead the Na'vi tribes into battle against the humans. His plan is to gain control over the great eagle *Tarouk* and become one of the *Tarouk Mactou*, and like Neytiri's great-great grandfather before him, unite the disparate tribes of Na'vi. He takes mastery over the great eagle, and descends into the crowd. Neytiri says to him 'I see you,' forgiving him his betrayal, and then 'I was afraid, Jake, for my people, but not anymore.' Implying that with his return and demonstration of total mastery over the peoples and the Pandoran wildlife, she

now has no reason to fear. He has descended to them, like Christ returned, and shall bring them their salvation. But he hasn't just won over Neytiri's love, he has also earned the admiration and respect of all the Na'vi, including his love rival, Tsu'tey. But his total mastery of the peoples has been through a process of sexual domination of an ever escalating series of creatures, from the horse, to the eagles and the woman herself, Jake has through both spiritual and physical coitus established himself as the alpha male par excellence.

He then speaks to the Na'vi in their language, 'I am here to serve you' positing a humility, but then continues in English, asking Tsu'tey for his help, stating 'I can't do this without you,' reaffirming his position as the nominal leader of the Na'vi, responsible for their safety and the one to engineer their fight against the humans, but requiring Tsu'tey's aid in their fight against the common enemy. But what is telling is that in a show of brotherhood, Jake asks Tsu'tey to act as translator, relegating the formerly active Neytiri to the role of passive observer. This is after all, men's work and there is no more place for the woman despite her better linguistic skills. The once fearful female warrior has been restored to her place as passive help-mate and quiet observer.

Prior to the decisive battle, Jake prays to Ehwa, the goddess tree of life, to help the Na'vi to fight the humans. Neytiri informs him that Ehwa doesn't choose sides (like a good woman, Ehwa too remains passive observer). However, as the fight looks like it is being lost, the Pandoran wildlife enters into the fray on behalf of the Na'vi, as Neytiri cheers on. It seems that Jake was right to pray to Ehwa, for she has indeed come to his aid. Clearly, not only is Jake more spiritually connected to Neytiri's spiritual world than she, he is also more correct in his interpretation of her religious belief system, than she. Truly, he is their exceptional messiah.

In the final act of the film, Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) asks 'Hey Sully, how does it feel to betray your own race.' While in his mind, the battle for *unobtainium* has become about the human race versus the Na'vi, the question could also be in reference to Sully betraying the 'white' race in favour of non western culture and custom. But he really hasn't betrayed anything, for the film has simply translocated conservative American ideology into a new, 3D, otherworldly forum and has transposed white culture and white male mastery onto the Na'vi population while inculcating them into patriarchal hegemony.

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NOTES

- 1 Avatar surpassed the two billion dollar worldwide box office gross mark in February of 2010, the total worldwide sales of the film have now reached 2.7 billion USD. <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-02-01/-avatar-tops-box-office-passes-2-billion-in-worldwide-sales.html>, worldwide box office gross records, <http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>.
- 2 Mulvey, Laura. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' *Screen* 16.3, Autumn, 1975. 6–18. www.jahsonic.com/VPNC.html. Accessed May 1, 2010.
- 3 The film's anti-educationalist message is best embodied by the scientist Dr. Augustine, who is ambivalently referred to as 'doctor,' and who appears to be in various capacities, a botanist, an anthropologist, chemist, physicist and medical doctor. Doctor, then seems to refer to any educated person whose roles and functions are malleable depending on the needs of the script.

Méliès and Early Cinema(gic)

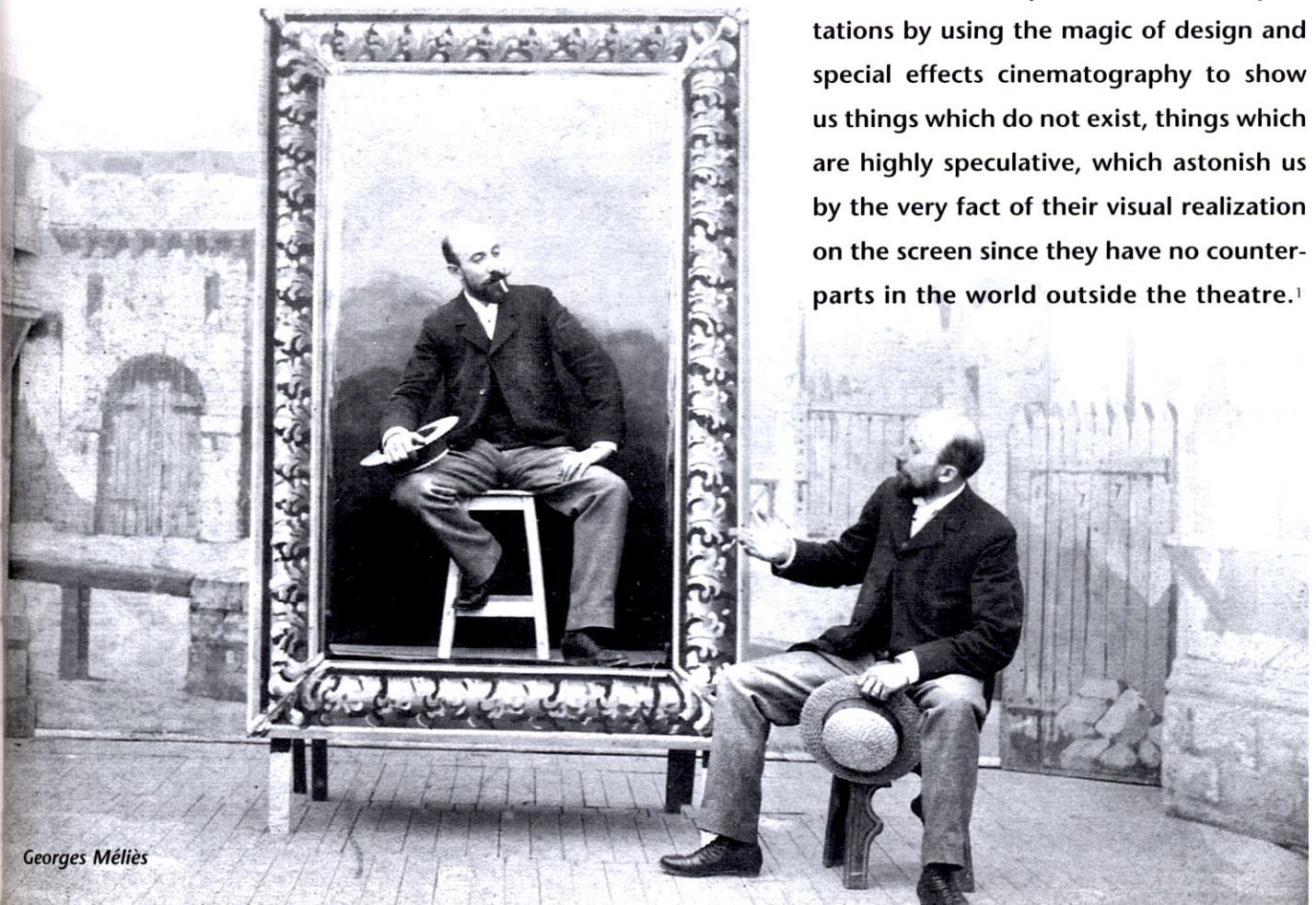
CONJURING THE SCIENCE-FICTION FILM GENRE

by LUKASZ BORON

This article is a theoretical analysis of a particular niche in film studies. It examines the profound influence of early cinema on the development of the science-fiction genre by considering: the concept of spectatorship, the apparatus of exhibition, the manipulation of temporality, and the influence of master conjurer and filmmaker Georges Méliès and his use of trick photography. This article seeks to reconstruct the genealogy of sci-fi from the fragmented remnants of early cinema. By adopting a historiographical and archival approach to research, each scholarly text presents a unique concept to the study of film history. Critical attention focuses on the theoretical framework of such notable scholars as Rick Altman, Mary Ann Doane, Thomas Elsaesser, Tom Gunning, Brooks Landon, Albert J. La Valley, Christian Metz, Simon Popple and Vivian Sobchack. Their work cumulatively proposes an interpretive history of early sci-fi cinema through a critical analysis of the genre in its formative era, of which Georges Méliès is the foremost author.

Before discussing the origins of the contemporary science-fiction genre, one must extrapolate a modern definition that is consistent with its earliest cinematic form. In one of the leading critical studies of American sci-fi cinema, *Screening Space*, Sobchack distills science-fiction to its first principles by analyzing its decisive role in the broad landscape of cinema. The genre is quite broad, in a sense, with various theorists offering numerous competing definitions. Sobchack, however, narrows her focus on the genre's speculative nature, noting that:

The SF film attempts to meet our expectations by using the magic of design and special effects cinematography to show us things which do not exist, things which are highly speculative, which astonish us by the very fact of their visual realization on the screen since they have no counterparts in the world outside the theatre.¹



Georges Méliès

In his essay, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," Altman distinguishes between two methods of analyzing genre theory. The sci-fi genre may be examined in terms of its semantic properties—a set of common characters types, locations, camera movements, and so forth—as well as its syntax—the denotation of meaning from its aforementioned semantic characteristics.² Altman notes that, "The semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged."³ Though still in its gestational period, early cinema employs recurring motifs to define science-fiction's syntactic theme of speculation. If traditional genre theory does indeed dictate science-fiction, then semantics are its bricks and mortar.

In *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence*, Landon surmises that, "Special effects facilitate the depiction of SF stories by providing the necessary images of non-existent phenomena—futuristic cities, other planets, space ships, aliens, faster-than-light travel"⁴ and the like. Arguably then, the first science-fiction motion picture in the history of cinema is Georges Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), a film that entertains several salient examples of such visual speculation. Influenced by the earlier literary traditions of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and H.G. Wells' *The First Men and the Moon*, the story follows a spectacular journey to the moon aboard a makeshift rocket.⁵ After a group of explorers lands on its rocky and unstable surface, they are immediately surrounded by the strange and unfamiliar: streams of fire explode from beneath the surface; stars turn into women and snow appears to fall from the sky; after descending into the lunar surface, an umbrella magically transforms into a mushroom; the explorers encounter hostile moon creatures; captured by a society of civilized beings, the men escape in their rocket and fall back to earth unscathed. *Le Voyage dans la Lune* is a testament to the ideology of sci-fi cinema through overt motifs of speculation and its profound exploration of the unknown.

In "Early Film History and Multi-Media: An Archaeology of Possible Futures?" Elsaesser addresses the distinction between the genealogy and archeology of cinematic history: the former is concerned with trying to "trace back a continuous line of decent from the present to the past,"⁶ whereas the latter suggests history is written through individual, fragmented and discontinuous narratives. Modern scholarship aligns itself with the notion that early cinema is not primitive, rather, it is quite mature in its conception at the turn of the century.⁷ Following this reasoning, one can argue that cinema comes into existence after a period of gestation.

The grand narrative of science-fiction cinema is a discontinuous pastiche of competing histories. Cinema itself is envisioned as a technological collage of various contributing chronologies.⁸ Sci-fi genre theory is a residual narrative of distinct concepts that seek to reconcile Méliès' films with the traditions of the magic theatre, trick photography, early film spectatorship, and the cinema of attractions. The magic theatre is perhaps the first decisive mode of displaying the power of illusion, in congruence with the visual shock of cinematic attractions.

In its basic form, early sci-fi cinema follows the historical tradition of the magic theatre, a model of exhibition first adopted by—a much younger—Méliès at the Theatre Robert

Houdin in Paris.⁹ A practicing conjurer himself, Méliès "labour[s] to make visual that which...was impossible to believe"¹⁰ through proficient illusions. Méliès later transposes this to film by breaking the image down into its components of reception. Through masterful illusions, early audiences are torn between science—the logic and objective knowledge that what they see is real—and fiction—the disbelief of seeing something that questions their preconceived knowledge of the object itself. In his article, "Traditions of Trickery: The Role of Special Effects in the Science Fiction Film," La Valley provides an example of this in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* when the professor conjures a Selenite—a creature living beneath the moon's surface—to disappear in a cloud of smoke, thereby making the impossible—spontaneous disappearance—seem possible.¹¹ The filmmaker merges these two disparate notions through "his recognition that the film image combine[s] realistic effects with a conscious awareness of artifice."¹² Méliès develops the sci-fi genre at a curious juncture between objective truth and a subjective interpretation of the visual image.

Notable for his extensive work on early cinema, Gunning reconciles his discussion of early spectatorship with the sci-fi genre. In his article, "An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," Gunning argues that the fundamental aesthetics of early cinema, or "the cinema of attractions,"¹³ imagines film through a sequence of visual shocks. In their infancy, the cinema-going audience "exists outside of the willing suspension of disbelief"¹⁴ and perceives the seemingly imaginary images onscreen—a journey to the moon in a makeshift rocket, an encounter with strange creatures, and subsequent return to earth—as real. The sequence of tableaux in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* reaches a climax during which Méliès relieves his audience through a moment of revelation or shock.¹⁵ Hurtling into space, the moon in the distance appears to grow in size and takes on a facial expression; it then grimaces in disapproval as the rocket crashed into its rocky landscape. In another instance, having escaped from their captors, the group of scientists is driven to the edge of a cliff where their rocket waits idly, and then plummets back to Earth. The ship falls from the sky and lands safely in the ocean where it is rescued. Early science-fiction is not dependent on narrative coherence but on "emphasizing the act of display"¹⁶ and consolidating wonder and revelation to a visually receptive audience.

In his notable essay, "Trucage and the Film," Metz propose that early science-fiction depends on visual trickery to astonish the audience. He maintains that "trucage"¹⁷—manipulations of trickery and visual effects unique to the aesthetics of the cinema—are an integral part of Méliès' body of work. In his earliest efforts, Méliès uses the trick of disappearance in *The Vanishing Lady* (1896) when he entertains the possibility of making a woman vanish; replacing her with a skeleton he then conjures her subsequent re-appearance in front of the camera.¹⁸ Visual deception becomes a fundamental trope of Méliès' aesthetic and of the sci-fi genre.

As King and Krzywinska surmise, "One of the pleasures offered by special effects is that technological progress is displayed at the level of the filmmaking process itself."¹⁹ The film *Méliès the Magician* (1997) examines the technique Méliès uses to create these apparent tricks:

I invented this special type of unusual shot, which my clients called transformation shots.... They were made with a series of techniques which can only be called trick shots. By chance, I'd found a trick stopping the camera, which permitted all kinds of substitutions.... For this special effect, the camera is stopped at the moment when a character should appear or disappear.²⁰

Throughout his short films, Méliès compromises the linear continuity of time through the use of a "substitutions splice"²¹ and other such superimpositions, making it appear that an object has transformed into something entirely different. By stopping the camera and simply substituting one object for another, he uses invisible editing to suspend the audience's disbelief in what they are seeing through short assemblages of staged, non-narrative fiction.

It is science-fiction cinema's contingency on time that propagates several types of manipulation as a means of special-effect. As Doane notes in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, in the early films of Méliès, "time is above all extraordinary, elastic, producing unpredictable effects, insisting upon the uncanny instantaneity of appearance, disappearance, and transformations."²² Popple and Kember assert that the cineaste substitutes familiar theatrical amusements such as trapdoors, false sets, mirrors, smoke and staged lighting with nuances of cinematic photography to develop the "trick film."²³ A direct descendant of the Parisian magic theatre, cinema gives Méliès the freedom to control the passage of time during his filmed illusions.

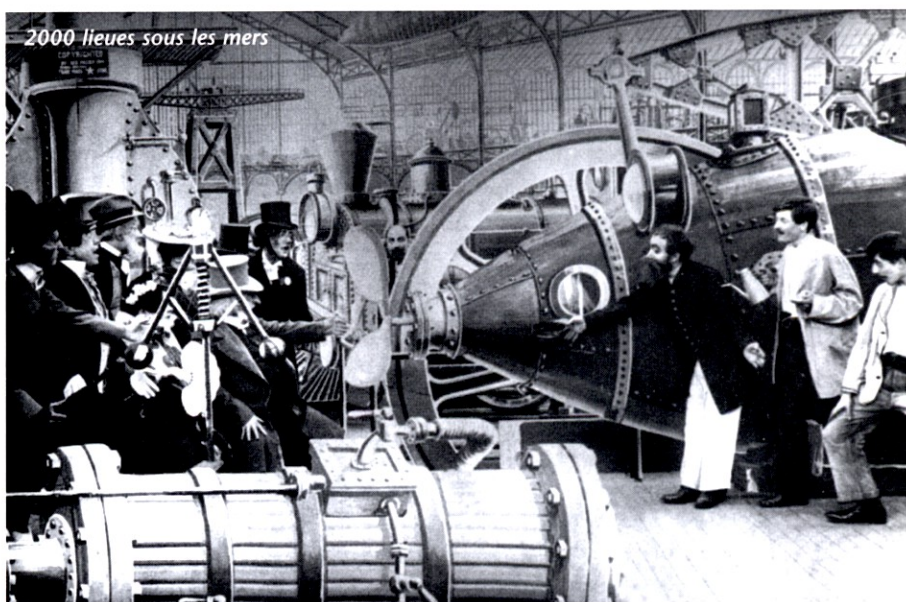
The sci-fi genre is a product of early cinema technology and is defined by the present and future capabilities of the filmmaker's apparatus. Méliès utilizes the ingenuity and visual nuances of cinema to create an entirely new genre. In "The 'Videology' of Science Fiction," Stewart argues that:

Movies about the future tend to be about the future of movies... Science fiction in the cinema often turns out to be... the fictional or fictive science of the cinema itself, the future feats it may achieve scanned in line with the technical feat that conceives them right now and before our eyes.²⁴

From as early as 1899, Méliès models the use of trick photography as a means of trucage, even pre-dating *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. "Méliès was perhaps the first to realize that cinema offered a practical way in which time and space could be manipulated through tricks."²⁵ In *Le Magicien* (1899) he performs an illusion during which he makes a ballerina disappear, reappear, transform into confetti and, thereafter, into a conjurer, substituting a shot of a magician jumping off a table with the shot of a ballerina falling gracefully to the ground.²⁶ In his 1904

short, *The Mermaid*, a man catches fish from inside a hat and, placing them inside an aquarium, transfigures them into a mermaid, who appears to float in the water through a technique of superimposition. He utilizes trick photography in *The Living Playing Cards* (1905) to make a deck of cards come to life—with a simple gesture, the Queen of Hearts emerges from her portrait and begins to walk towards the camera. As Gunning deduces, Méliès' work is indicative of a "technological means of representation" that is unique to science-fiction cinema.²⁷ Throughout his trick films, technological innovation becomes tantamount to the advancement of the science-fiction genre.

From a historiographical perceptive, how does Georges Méliès write the formative history of the sci-fi genre, and how can his fiction films—a creative and subjective version of non-history—be reunited with the archive? For the most part,



contemporary film studies do not focus on how history is written through sci-fi. Science-fiction narratives advocate their ideological interpretations as texts, but they do not themselves write history. Méliès' films are not a result of early cinema's naiveté, but are quite progressive.

Perhaps early cinema, this seemingly magical era of filmic discovery and innovation, is a unique example of how genres can write the history of film simply by being part of its inception. Precisely in his cinema, Méliès creates fictional, non-narrative, archival episodes of historical importance that demonstrate cinema's reliance on spectatorship, magic and the mechanics of filmmaking to create an entirely new genre tradition. His trick films are overt archival documents of a distant and critically incongruent history of early cinema. The history of past and present science-fiction is written through film. Méliès is simply its founding author.

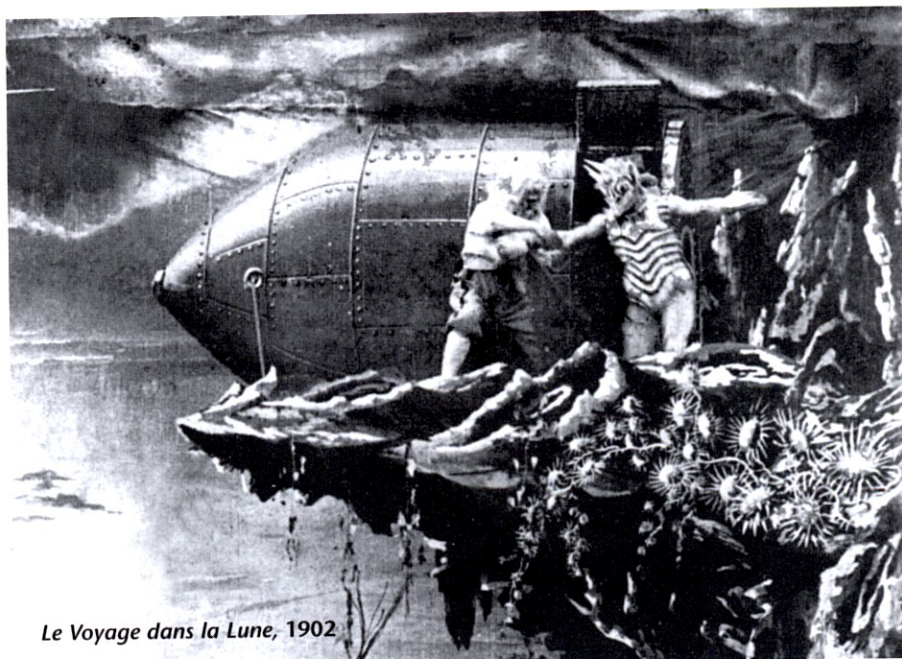
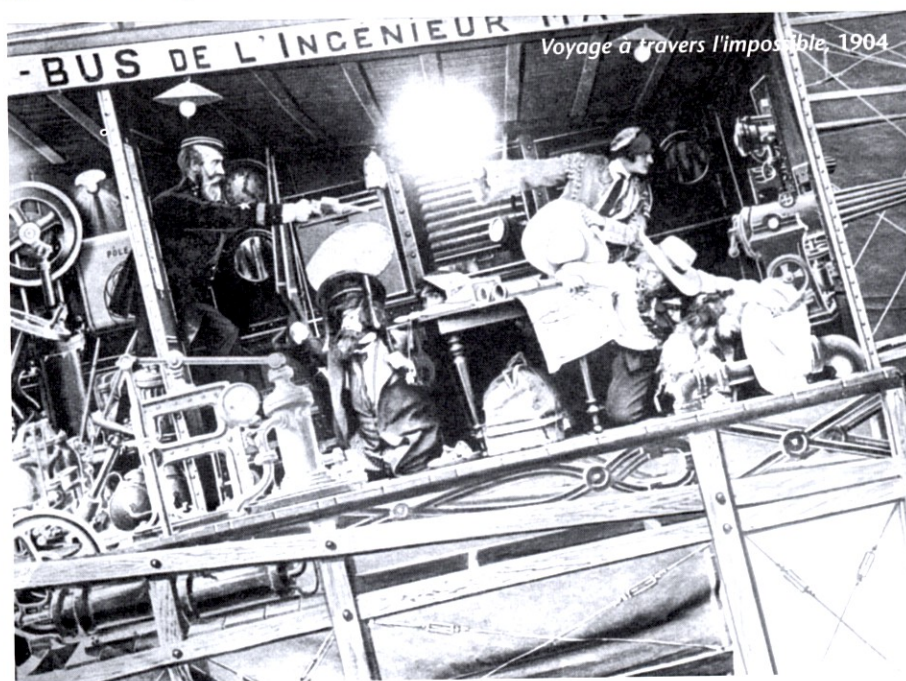
The science-fiction genre is a descendant of early cinema and the formative efforts of conjurer and cineaste Georges Méliès. A critical discussion of modern sci-fi extrapolates the speculative nature of the genre: its foremost dependence on magic and special effects, astonishing the audience, and the realization of the impossible. Discussed in terms of its semantic and syntactic elements, classic genre theory proposes that motifs common to sci-fi are thematic of speculation and that special effects are used to depict unfamiliar visual images throughout Méliès work, namely in *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. Influenced profoundly by the magic theatre, Méliès creates onscreen illusions that convincingly merge the objective truth of science with the subjectivity of fiction, while remaining overly mindful of his ruse on the audience.

A product of the cinema of attractions, Méliès' short films create visual shocks through salient moments of revelation by suspending disbelief and creating purportedly convincing visual images. His use of tricks is fundamental to the technique and aesthetics of science-fiction, demonstrated in such shorts as *Le Magicien*, *The Mermaid*, and *The Living Playing Cards*. Cinematic continuity is manipulated through transformation shots, using substitutions splices and superimpositions to make objects appear, disappear and transform into something else entirely. Méliès utilizes advancements in early cinema technology as his primary mode of representation, and is responsible for drafting the early history of the sci-fi genre through fictional trick films.

The work of Georges Méliès is, likewise, firmly grounded within the parameters of scientific objectivity. The notion of a heliocentric theory of early cinema is the basis for his aesthetic:

The camera is the spectator. The spectator in front of the screen says, 'show me.' I want to have a really passive part in the visual experience. Everything must move around me. Cinema must be like a planetary system, revolving around me, and I want to be at the centre of this system. I want to be the sun and the rest must move for me.²⁸

The struggle to grasp a definitive origin amidst the many discontinuities in film scholarship is a profound undertaking,



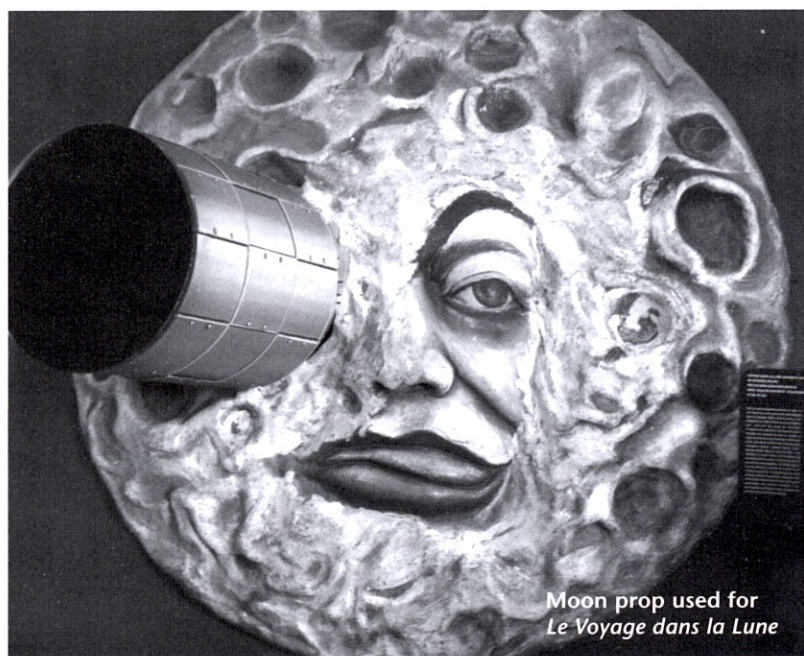
Le Voyage dans la Lune, 1902

prompting Elsaesser to go as far as to suggest that cinema, quoting Foucault, "has yet to be *invented*."²⁹ Perhaps sci-fi cinema has yet to enter into historiographical discussions because it has not achieved its full potential, either theoretically, technically, or conceptually. This may suggest that cinema itself, like a system of planets revolving around the omnipotent spectator, is ever expanding, and that scholarship can only speculate on its true formative origins. Regrettably, science-fiction genre theory may share a similar fate.

Lukasz Boron received his Honours BA in Film at York University. His recent publications include an article in *Kinema* (University of Waterloo) entitled "The Language and Genealogy of Early Spy Cinema," an expansive study in which he explores the origin and evolution of the pre-Bondian spy genre (1919–1959) and extrapolates several of its recurring motifs, including the domesticated spy and the fated female agent.




Le Voyage dans la Lune, 1902



Moon prop used for
Le Voyage dans la Lune

NOTES

- 1 Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 91.
- 2 Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (1984): 10.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Brooks Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)production* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992): 67.
- 5 Ceccaldi, Daniel, Charles-Antoine De Croix, Madeleine Malthete, and Marina Moncade. "Commentaries." *Méliès the Magician*, DVD, directed by Jacques Mény (1997; Chicago, IL: Facets Video, 2001).
- 6 Thomas Elsaesser, "Early Film History and Multi-Media: An Archeology of Possible Futures?" in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyon Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," *Cinemas* 14, no. 2 (2004): 99.
- 9 Malthete, Madeleine. "Me?lie?s' Magic Show." *Méliès the Magician*, DVD, directed by Jacques Mény (1997; Chicago, IL: Facets Video, 2001).
- 10 Tom Gunning. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 117.
- 11 Albert La Valley, "Traditions of Trickery: The Role of Special Effects in the Science Fiction Film" in *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*, ed. George Edgar Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 147.
- 12 Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 118.
- 13 Ibid., 116.
- 14 Ibid., 115.
- 15 Ibid., 122.
- 16 Ibid., 121.
- 17 Christian Metz, "'Trucage' and the Film," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 4 (1977): 657.
- 18 Ibid., 662.
- 19 Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London: Wallflower, 2000), 67.
- 20 *Méliès the Magician*, DVD, directed by Jacques Mény (1997; Chicago, IL: Facets Video, 2001).
- 21 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 134.
- 22 Ibid., 136.
- 23 Simon Popple and Joe Kember, *Early Cinema: From Factory Gate to Dream Factory* (New York: Wallflower, 2004), 62.
- 24 Garret Stewart, "The 'Videology' of Science Fiction," in *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*, ed. George Edgar Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 159.
- 25 Ceccaldi, Daniel, Charles-Antoine De Croix, Madeleine Malthete-Me?lie?s, and Marina Moncade. "Commentaries." *Méliès the Magician*, DVD, directed by Jacques Mény (1997; Chicago, IL: Facets Video, 2001).
- 26 Doane, *Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 134.
- 27 Tom Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 73.
- 28 Ceccaldi, Daniel, Charles-Antoine De Croix, Madeleine Malthete, and Marina Moncade. "Commentaries." *Méliès the Magician*, DVD, directed by Jacques Mény (1997; Chicago, IL: Facets Video, 2001).
- 29 Elsaesser, "Early Film History," 17.



Renaissance: Paris 2054

POSTMODERN ANXIETIES

RENAISSANCE: PARIS 2054 AS TECH-NOIR

by WILLIAM B. COVEY

Contemporary filmmakers create art from within a postmodern era where “every text is an intertext that borrows, knowingly or not, from the immense archive of previous culture”.¹

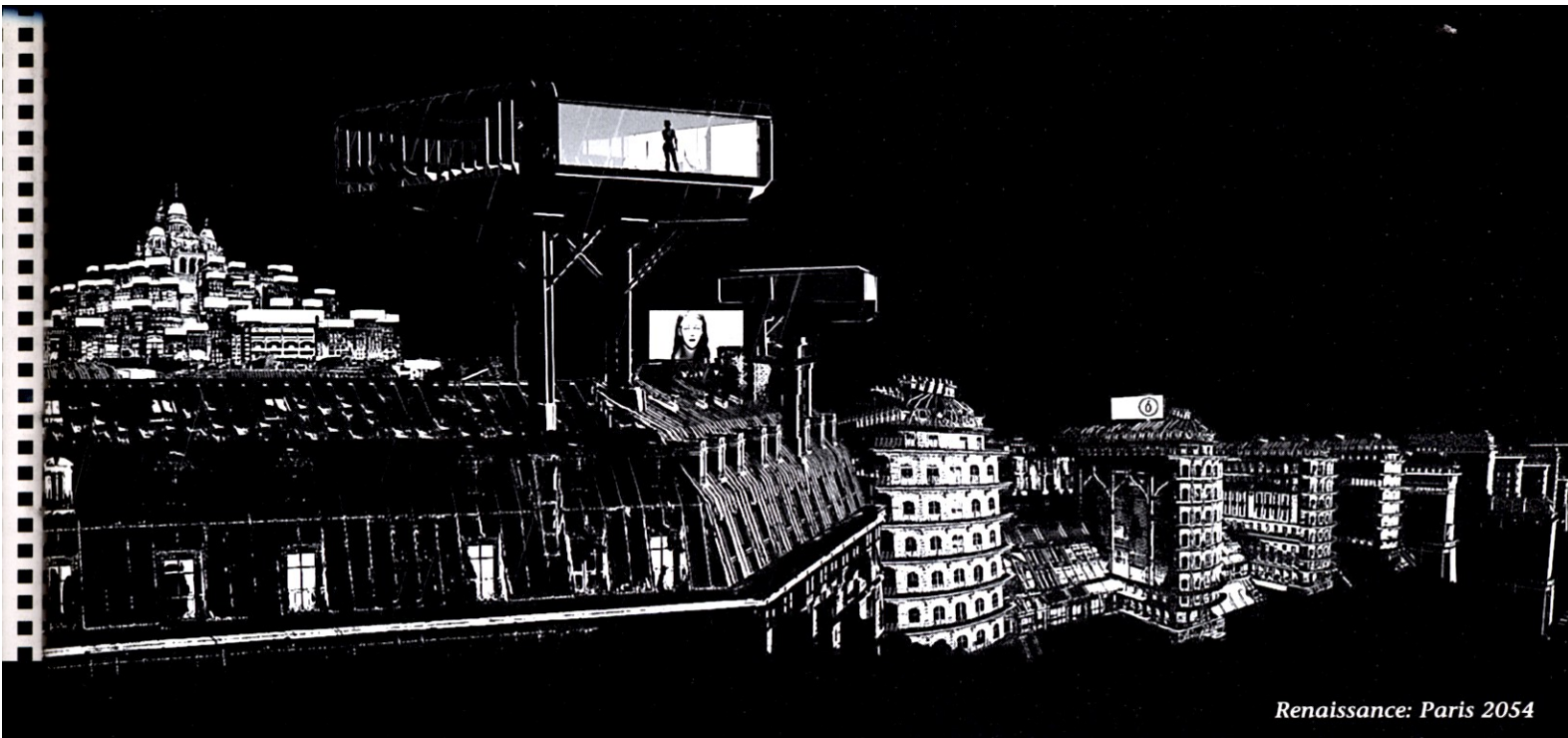
In literary studies, Harold Bloom labels this awareness the “anxiety of influence,” a dynamic where young poet ephebes, locked in a Freudian family drama, wrestle with their older master precursors in order to make “history by misreading one another”.² By means of such misreading and struggling with and against the master’s influences, the hope is that “if he emerges from it, however crippled and blinded, he will be among the strong poets”.³ In film studies, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson make a parallel argument, stating that all stories are unified by motivations and that multiple motivations can co-exist within one film. Among their list of possible choices, the most common is “intertextual motivation” where artists follow generic conventions.⁴

Christian Volckman’s *Renaissance: Paris 2054* (France 2006) fits this theoretical construct of previous authorial influence as a version of the postmodern “tech-noir” genre film, traversing some of the same terrain as the master intertext, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (USA 1982, 1992, 2007). The new film and filmmaker are both self-conscious of the master text and intent on using contemporary technological advances to swerve away from the master text to try and create a genre hybrid of neo-noir, melodrama, and techno-thriller that stands out from the

past. *Renaissance* may be seen as an amalgam noted for its distinctive visual design inspired by *Blade Runner*, for example by employing German Expressionist visual style, cyberpunk themes, technology, and a *film noir* narrative structure. David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer discuss a sub-category of intertextuality called transtextuality where they argue that texts also may share relationships between themselves⁵ and this, too, is a concept that echoes Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence, albeit making the dynamic bi-directional. As the precursor text, *Blade Runner* has influenced *Renaissance* in key ways; yet, because Volckman uses innovative tools such as motion-capture (or “mo-cap”) technology, the young director also adds new visual and thematic elements to his work. Such elements serve to continue the evolution of noir and update the landscape from which to view previous and future films. As Ginette Vincendeau argues, “French neo-noir could thus simply designate any noir film made after *Série Noire*, [yet] the term refers also to a set of reconfigurations”.⁶ Juan A. Tarancón concurs, stating that, “genres are dynamic structures that cannot be reduced to static, unchanging configurations”.⁷ As both an *homage* to *Blade Runner* and a reconfiguration of noir studies, *Renaissance* simultaneously operates as an intertext in its imitations of a classic text and a transtext in its corresponding swerve toward new technoculture.

The analysis can begin with a history of respective productions. The process of completing and distributing *Renaissance* contained nearly as many roadblocks as *Blade Runner*’s history.

⁸ Despite years of work and careful attention to detail by the



Renaissance: Paris 2054

filmmakers, *Renaissance* was given a limited release through Disney to select United States urban or art theaters at the tail end of 2006 and, with mixed to weak popular press reviews, disappeared from US theaters quickly, only to have had a slightly better reception with the 2007 release of the Miramax DVD. In an interview, director Christian Volckman claims that Disney, "didn't really care" about the movie because "when we were finished with the film... they'd forgot [sic] about it" (Fischer).⁹ John Hayes, in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, offered one of the positive popular reviews of the film when it opened, calling it, "an engrossing high-tech amalgam of film noir melancholy, sci-fi speculation, graphic novel fantasy, motion-capture animation, and computer-generated imagery".¹⁰ Hayes is correct to see the film as a postmodern genre hybrid that emphasizes visual style over character and plot.

Renaissance is also constructed from an unusual combination of textual sources. The movie was first filmed in live-action, motion-capture style with the actors wearing Lycra leotard jump suits studded with round, mo-cap sensors that, "corresponded to a respective point mirrored in the 3-D virtual space".¹¹ Computer generated imagery (CGI) effects comprised a second level of this film as the entire movie was next animated over and rendered in high contrast blacks and whites, with a sparse amount of grays used mainly in scenes featuring light or glass reflections. The animators constructed the human characters and physical space from the original mo-cap footage where, as director Volckman explained, "you only see these dots in space flying around corresponding to the actors' body movements".¹² Digital camera supervisor Henri Zaitoun further revealed that the "camera was a weightless cube in virtual space that was moved with a mouse instead of a dolly or geared head".¹³ As described, cutting-edge filmmaking processes excited the director and crew and may have been focused upon more than traditional celluloid storytelling techniques.

Next, the filmmakers employed the previously described computer mouse to imitate a camera's view by following the

action of the character's movements rather than placing the characters within a carefully designed staging mise-en-scene. Such a production process proved taxing for the "actors" as well, since they had very little in physical props or sets to which to respond—"no sets, no wardrobe, very few props—so they have to really visualize how the film is going to look".¹⁴ Final rendering was drawn in black and white, adding in the last layer to this film, where twelve artists edited an individual sequence per week after the director approved each one. The artists claim no rotoscoping was done on the film. *Renaissance*, when the final cut was complete and ready for distribution, "was transferred to 35mm by London's Moving Picture Company".¹⁵ As might be suspected with such a complex series of steps, production on this movie took more than a year of the entire project, which itself spanned nearly a decade between first developments in 1998 until its release date in late 2006. Volckman discusses the production schedule in an interview on the Peugeot-Citroen website saying, "It took six years to make *Renaissance* and the project involved over 650 people. For the people and the objects in the film, I worked with comic strip professionals, architects, and draughtspeople from diverse fields. Everything you see onscreen was designed and drawn before being modeled".¹⁶

Fans of Ridley Scott can see in Volckman's comments a foundational parallel between *Renaissance* and *Blade Runner*. Scott is also known to focus on visual design and pay close attention to the smallest details in production design and mise-en-scène. Entire chapters of Paul Sammon's "making of" book *Future Noir* are devoted to noting minute details on Scott's *Blade Runner* set, including discussions of various items such as costumes, traffic lights, automobiles, billboards, magazines at a stand, and other such aspects key to the look of future Los Angeles. Director Scott calls this accumulation of detail located within his frame "layering" and admits that *Blade Runner* tries to be "a 700 layer cake".¹⁷ Each layer of special effects technology in *Renaissance* similarly introduces an exciting dynamic.

In particular, Scott and Volckman are among the many filmmakers who admire the apparently endless possibilities of digital filmmaking. As like-minded production designer Doug Chiang explained while working on Robert Zemeckis' mo-cap film *Beowulf* (2007), "In a live-action film with traditional visual effects, you're locked into the plate of what was photographed with the actors...In this case, Bob [Zemeckis] can move the camera or even restage the actors with complete freedom".¹⁸ For *Renaissance* Volckman recorded each actor's performance at 360 degrees, with no notion of a fixed camera point. He comments, "This way, I didn't have to worry about sets, lighting or makeup. I could just focus on the actors' performances and let the cameras roll all day long" (*Renaissance* press promo 6).¹⁹ Similarly, *Beowulf*'s visual effects supervisor Jerome Chen concurs, saying of his film that you, "can shoot the performance first, without worrying about anything else. And then, once he [the director Zemeckis] has the performance captured, he can begin to create the film cinematically".²⁰ *Renaissance*'s parallel construction method led to the portion of the film perhaps completed most quickly, filming the live actors. Volckman shot for nine weeks almost entirely on a mo-cap platform stage that was ten by six meters across and between eight and nine meters high inside a Luxembourg warehouse.²¹ The digital technology changed any traditional notion of performance. The motion-capture supervisor Remi Brun discloses:

Though the mo-cap stage wasn't soundproof, the actors didn't perform to a pre-recorded voice track but actually said the lines as they acted it. 'They were acting as if they were on stage on Broadway... They created an emotional space and it was really strong.'²²

Yet, ironically, none of the actors voiced the final soundtrack; rather, voice-over actors were hired and overdubbed afterwards, and the DVD lists only the American voice-over actors in its credits. In fact, the "Making Of" portion of the Region 1 DVD carefully illustrates the actual character actors making faces and acting in motion, while emphasizing only their body movement and using music and voice-over to mask their live recitation of the dialogue. The end result is a bit strange for viewers, as often the dialogue does not feel as though it matches the animated characters' faces or actions, on either the French or the English soundtrack, making it difficult for viewers to form an emotional bond with the key players in the film. As the transtextual dynamic would predict, this facet of *Renaissance* is much different than *Blade Runner* where the mechanized Replicants look human, were played by humans, and, when showing emotion, such as in key scenes with Rachel (Sean Young) or Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), often acted more human than the emotionless, robotic character of the human,



blade runner cop named Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford).

In an essay on the problem of envisioning corporeality in digital filmmaking, film critic Markos Hadjioannou suggests some of the possible reasons for such an intellectual disconnect. Hadjioannou argues that the very process of capturing body movement is problematic for digital art. The difficulty begins, he suggests, with "the fact that the motion is encoded into the software system on the basis of a limited number of marks, as if the human body could be narrowed down to a few separate points".²³ Thus:

In a sense, the characters in *Renaissance* are morphs—real bodies reduced to extraordinary black and white surfaces. Indeed, even though the actors form the basis for the creation of the characters, they seem completely absent from the movie... All that remains is the image of sharp lines and smooth exteriors fluidly moving along the screen. The actual body has been substituted by an ageless surface that, like plastic surgery, conceals the time and effort necessary for its creation.²⁴

Cognitive film theory explains this process more scientifically. For example, Jens Eder has begun to analyze various cognitive and affective responses viewers have to fictional film characters. In his work, he argues:

Audiovisual representations of characters can be conceived of as dense streams of cues that trigger a wide range of mental reactions in viewers, including perceptions, feelings, and imaginings.²⁵

While the seemingly natural and three-dimensional movements of the animated characters maintained my interest during parts of *Renaissance* because of the wondrous aspect of the new technology, ultimately the special effects trickery could not compensate for my lack of empathy for these characters. In fact, an inherent paradox exists in the aesthetic form because this movie consists of indexical photographic images re-imagined inside a virtual world. As Jan Simons has remarked about Lars von Trier's experimental film *Europa* (1991): "The paradox is presented by the images themselves".²⁶ For example, when images created in the real world combine with images created somewhere else such as inside the computer, "the space-time relationships that result from these syntheses in the film are impossible in the real world".²⁷ Since we mentally intuit that these images cannot exist, our brain cannot process them as real and our viewing habits are disrupted because of what Eder argues is a cognitive challenge to our respective mental schemata.²⁸

On a more surface level, viewing problems also result when the viewer observes the eyes of the animated characters in *Renaissance*. For the reason that mo-cap sensors could not be placed over the actor's eyes, the filmmakers created special eye-glasses that, "were barely heavier than normal glasses"²⁹ in order to capture actors' eye movements. But, again, eye movement is not the same as gazing at real human eyes, and the filmmakers decided that, "you can capture in 2-D space with one camera [such eye movement] because the pupil just moves

around an essentially flat plane".³⁰ The end result is that the eyes either looked animated (drawn in) or they moved or stayed mobile in unnatural ways. The facial supervisor Olivier Renouard describes his own struggle with this process:

'There seems to be a fine line between a successful facial system that works impressively well, and 'bad' shapes that will make the character look terrible... there are still a lot ways to improve this domain.'³¹

Because the imitation of human eye and body movement in *Renaissance* does not equate with the movement and expressions of a live human being, the general impression that viewers have while watching *Renaissance* is one of disconnect: they are not empathizing with real characters as much as they are watching animated simulacra. The resulting film contains indexical images that, "nevertheless lose their dependence on an independent, objective 'reality'".³² Eder explains this problem cognitively as one where the viewer's mental closeness "depends on the degree of perceived realism of this world, of perceptual correspondences between the audiovisual track and real environments, and of the viewer's immersion in the film's diegesis".³³ Had the director chosen to imitate a graphic novel, we would accept his animated characters onscreen because we expect the drawings and their two dimensional limitations. By choosing instead to make the graphic design come to life, viewers note the many ways the animated characters lack the lifelike





Renaissance: Paris 2054



traits encoded into traditional cell animation. Emotionally distant from the main characters, our interest in them remains at arm's length.

As a critic interested in postmodern forms that reinvigorate genre studies, I very much wanted to like every aspect of a film as experimental as *Renaissance*. As Gary Bettinson states, "experimental storytelling begins with the director's cinephilic engagement with genre".³⁴ This film, like *Blade Runner* before it, combines an expressionist visual style with some of the key themes of cyberpunk in ways that innovatively re-think the genre of film noir for the twenty-first century. Yet, as Susan Doll and Greg Faller warn, adopting postmodern forms can be risky because they may create multi-generic films that "do not homogenize their various conventions, thus failing to emphasize one particular genre and perhaps causing problematic generic classification for the spectator".³⁵ While a trace of this problem may be present in *Renaissance*, the film imitates sev-

eral narrative, visual, and thematic aspects of *Blade Runner* that should be very comfortable for genre critics and viewers.

For instance, just like *Blade Runner's* evil tycoon Tyrell (Joe Turkel) and his eponymous corporation that rules over the inhabitants of twenty-first century Los Angeles, *Renaissance* opens and closes with a constantly operating, interactive, digital billboard for the Avalon Corporation featuring a smiling blonde model who offers her opinion to the viewer. She repeats her message to every Parisian passerby: "I like being beautiful. I like to stay fit. That's why I like Avalon. With Avalon, I know I'm beautiful and I'm going to stay that way". Paul Dellenbach (Jonathan Pryce), a corporate bully, rules the Avalon Company, using his money and paid goons to harm and cajole scientists into sharing with him the formula he suspects they have discovered for human immortality. Similar to *Blade Runner* and the cyberpunk credo, the corporations have the most power and rule over everyday folks in mainstream

society. This is illustrated when one of the Paris cops discovers and expresses jealousy about night vision goggles and an invisibility suit that one of Avalon's henchmen is wearing, because, he remarks, the police force does not have the money to purchase such items for their own security forces. The electronic music in *Renaissance's* club scenes also conforms to the cyberpunk soundtrack and reminds us of *Blade Runner's* use of Vangelis' electronic music for similar purposes. However, playing with our genre expectations, *Renaissance* additionally employs classical orchestral music to rebel against some traditional cyberpunk conventions by using an older form of music.

The narrative provides further clues that this film is a generic hybrid. Through flashbacks we learn that an Islamic-born cop on the French police force named Barthélémy Karas (Daniel Craig), the film's hero, grew up seemingly underclass in an area called the Kasbah with another fellow named Farfella who seems to be Muslim and has become a successful criminal. Vincendeau has argued that French neo-noirs "routinely showed drug dealing, theft, and prostitution as situated within ethnically marked milieux",³⁶ implying that this film will follow a cultural pattern. While these two men respect each other, and Farfella owes Karas a debt, their daily lives have grown apart and only intersect during crises. Karas is known as a good cop, but he is also an impatient maverick who breaks the rules so often that he is finally told by his boss to turn in his badge and computerized identification stick. Instead of being just the typical, subcultural outsider found in most cyberpunk films, *Renaissance* adapts the film noir narrative pattern of featuring a lone investigator who actively takes on the evil corporation. Thus, Karas' character parallels Deckard's in *Blade Runner*, who we remember is introduced as a maverick, ex-blade runner cop who has lost his wife and become completely isolated from society. Susan Doll and Greg Faller see such noir protagonists as representing "the last vestiges of morality in a decaying society",³⁷ yet both films clearly mark their heroes as ethically troubled anti-heroes with personal problems. Vincendeau is probably more accurate when he states that male neo-noir protagonists are either "vulnerable and/or dysfunctional".³⁸

Blade Runner is known for its use of "retrofitting," a technique Ridley Scott invented, where new technologies are placed over the top of old forms in order to predict what the future might look like. For example, Deckard's photo analyzer combines an old-fashioned, small screen, black and white television set equipped with a futuristic computer program that allows one to verbally command a cursor to search inside and around corners of a pre-existing still photograph. In *Renaissance*, the retrofitting design is similar. Old Paris seems still to exist, as we see depicted famous architecture like the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame Cathedral. But, in 2054, the old seems to be left untouched and unpopulated, except below ground in the Metro train system. New highways and glass walkways have been built above and around the old city. Humans neither use the Seine River nor visit the aged architectural landmarks, but rather breeze past them in speedy vehicles along superhighways. Where Tyrell's home and office in *Blade Runner* was a giant pyramid that towered over future Los Angeles, Dellenbach conducts business in the Avalon headquarters, a see-through glass office built into a half-circle arch

structure that dominates the roads and buildings as it towers above and around Paris. In a minor parallel to *Blade Runner*, Avalon scientists are researching premature aging in children, which is called Progeria. In *Blade Runner* this medical condition was called Methuselah's Syndrome and was the cause for why character Sebastian (William Sanderson) remained on earth. The prematurely aging children in *Renaissance* are marked on their necks with pyramid tattoos and experimented upon, a fate that even befalls Claus, the brother of the main research scientist named Muller (Ian Holm). Similarly, Sebastian in *Blade Runner* is kept from leaving earth for the upscale Off World colonies because of his medical disabilities. Director Volckman freely admits that there are numerous parallels between the two films. In an online interview, he claims, "I've also been inspired by American film noir movies from the 1950s and science fiction (Philip K. Dick, etc). And by comic strips, Frank Miller in particular, with his famous black-and-white *Sin City* series. I admire . . . films like *Tron*, *Blade Runner*, [and] *Minority Report*".³⁹ On the "Making Of" documentary portion of the Region 1 DVD Volckman is even clearer, declaring about *Renaissance*, "It's our *Blade Runner*."⁴⁰

In *Future Noir*, Paul Sammon has shown that tech-noir films may fruitfully combine thematic and visual complexity⁴¹, and *Renaissance* and *Blade Runner* illustrate this charge. Therefore, in emphasizing the continuing hegemony of communication and information media in modern life, *Renaissance* revises the alienation motif of 1980s cyberpunk as discussed by Scott Bukatman in *Blade Runner*.⁴² Karas and Deckard share the fact that they have nothing in their lives except jobs and empty apartments. There are no long-term lovers or close friends. Yet, whereas *Blade Runner* enjoys a cult following, is available in at least three director-approved film versions (1982, 1992, and 2007), and is now accepted as arguably the most original film of the tech-noir sub-genre, most critics have been disappointed in *Renaissance*, labeling it as a poor homage or a weak narrative. Volckman himself seems to have realized some of the problems with his final cut. When asked what he has learned from the *Renaissance* project, he answers: "Story, story, story. No. It's just more on the identification level, just to put more personal stuff into it and not be scared of seeing things, you know, on the human side".⁴³

Blade Runner ends with Deckard learning lessons in humanity from a dying Batty, and then rescuing Rachel from his apartment and, in the original version, flying away from the city together with her. Critic Marshall Deutelbaum argues that *Blade Runner's* narrative, "serves to develop a metaphoric argument based upon sight which answers the questions raised by the film about what it means to be human".⁴⁴ Through the visual pyrotechnics of new CGI, *Renaissance* asks a similar question of technology as *Blade Runner*: "If artificial intelligence were placed in a body that looked and acted human, would such a machine be a human?".⁴⁵ Both films struggle to come up with an affirmative answer to the question. Yet, *Renaissance* ends with no such lessons learned, using the narrative pattern of science fiction noirs described by James Ursini where humans are "caught in the web of a seemingly absurd and meaningless existence over which they have no control".⁴⁶ For example, Karas has promised Bislane (Catherine McCormack), Ilona's (Romola Garai) sister, that he will "save" the kidnapped

woman from the evil Dellenbach and the clutches of the Avalon Corporation. Yet, once he discovers the truth, that Ilona is actually an evil scientist who plans to use the secret of immortality for her own gains, Karas shoots and kills Ilona and then lies to Bislane that he has helped her sister to a hero's escape though she will never return to Paris. *Renaissance* concludes as a film noir, with a lie employed to maintain a romantic relationship and Karas' moral code compromised. Near the end of the film we also find that Claus, the captive, isolated brother of Muller, the murdered scientist who discovered immortality, has escaped Dellenbach and is left standing abandoned in the falling snow, burning a family photo next to a burn barrel. This scene is followed by a final digital "crane shot" that moves up to focus on the neverending promises of the beautiful life being spoken by the aforementioned blonde model from the digital Avalon billboard. The viewer now knows the irony of her dialogue, and the mise-en-scène illustrates only a dystopian nightmare future world for those living in Paris 2054. In fact, the narrative of *Renaissance* wraps back around on itself in a Möbius strip style. The film begins with Karas having a nightmare where a boy is yelling to him, "Get out of here. Run! Run!" a sentiment that might easily be yelled once more at the dark ending of this film.

Despite the recent success of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), the effectiveness of most mo-cap technology films to make empathetic digital characters remains limited. Still, *Renaissance* should be praised as a dynamic transnational dialogue with *Blade Runner* that is moderately successful as an intertextual tech-noir. More importantly, *Renaissance* serves as a generic transtext for future and past tech-noirs. The pessimistic dystopian theme expands the criminal landscape to the usually romantic city of Paris, rather than relying on the more traditional outlying *arrondissements* or suburban banlieue neighborhoods.⁴⁷ Further, the mere use of mo-cap technology adds innovation to the genre. Whatever the limitations of current digital technology, *Renaissance* accomplishes what Thomas Leitch identifies as, "a transcription or an interpretation of its source"⁴⁸ and, thus, qualifies as a successful genre hybrid that combines cinephilia with science fiction and neo-noir with technology. The jury is still out on whether Christian Volckman has fully survived his attempts to wrestle with a master text of American tech-noir. Until or unless it ultimately builds a cult status like *Blade Runner* has done over the years, *Renaissance* may be doomed to be lost in the shadows of its more popular precursor.

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POP STAR

is the Medium is the Message

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

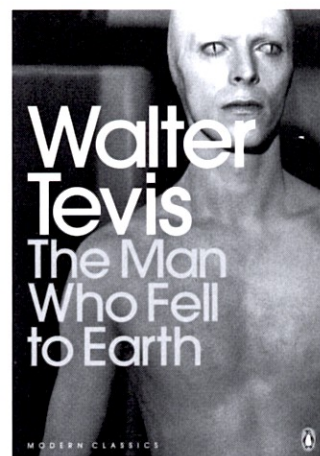
By MILAN PRIBISIC

In his 1963 novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth* Walter Tevis uses a genre of science fiction to tell an allegory about the visitor from outer space who in 1985¹ falls on Earth to look at us and show us how alien or alike we may look to an extraterrestrial. Tevis's extraterrestrial is not that much unlike the humans: "He was not a man; yet he was very much like a man...he was human; but not properly a *man*. Also, man-like, he was susceptible to love, to fear, to intense physical pain and to self-pity."² Tevis goes on to describe this "Icarus descending" from the sky as six and a half feet tall, with a hair as white as an albino's, pale blue eyes and light tan facial skin, a hairless, almost translucent skin and improbably slight frame. We also find out that his fingernails are artificial, that he has four toes on his feet, no vermiform appendix, no wisdom teeth. His earlobes were synthetic, his nipples false, and his eyes irises opened vertically, like a cat's (6, 98). Thomas Jerome Newton, as this was the name he gave to the first human being he encountered, landed in Haneyville, Kentucky, an Anthean in human disguise.

Nicholas Roeg's 1976 film adaptation of Tevis' novel starts off with a brief montage of outer space shots including images of a space ship, its violent entrance into the Earth's atmosphere and crash landing into a lake-like water surface. Framed within an extreme long shot the viewers then see a tall, slim figure descending a barren hill next to something that looks like an abandoned mine. At first resembling a shot of Max Schreck from the silent classic W.F. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), preparing us thus for yet another movie about the undead coming to town to feed itself on the blood of the innocent virgins, as the camera comes closer to the hooded face in a medium shot we begin to recognize the pale facial features as, at the same time, iconic and alien but glamorous and pretty enough not to be confused with that immortal silent cinema representation of the undead. As the figure turns its back to the camera the hood is being removed to expose both a bright orange hair color on its head and the sign that reads Haneyville, village limit, elev. 2,850.

This opening recreates the entrance of a stranger coming into a new town typical of the classic Hollywood western. The first inhabitants the stranger meets look, however, more outlandish than the spindly figure in a duffel coat—we see an old-school traveling carnival with a blow-up space travel vehicle on which Moonwalk has been written, a drunk old man inside one of the amusement park cars, and an old, wrinkled, bespectacled lady looking suspiciously around her as she enters a jewelry store. The scene is thus, right from the opening credits sequence, set up for an interesting intercultural (intergalactic?) encounter.³

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian college professor, literary critic and so-called "prophet of the electronic age" published in 1964, a year after Tevis's publication of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, arguably his best-known work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. In it McLuhan rewrites the history of human civilization as related to the scientific discoveries of the media dominating the particular time period of human development. McLuhan's notion of the media as human extensions is complicated by the theory of technological determinism predicated on the premise that the dominant media technologies turn back to their creators by determining their ways of being human in history (i.e. the ways we perceive the environment, ourselves and others in it, the ways we process information, construct thoughts and feelings, and the ways we express and communicate them to us and among ourselves).



For McLuhan the media as our extensions are us and are central for understanding our cultures throughout history, as well as the relation between us as nature and technologies as products of culture. The medium consists of its content and its form, and a history of human civilization and media is, according to McLuhan, the history of the contents of old media becoming the forms of new media (e.g. the content of speech is language, the content of writing is speech, the content of new medium of print is the good, old, reliable manuscript writing, etc.) The history of media changes, then, is the history of remediation and renegotiation of old and new media—the content always changes in relation to the new form it is given. This “aesthetics of media transition” is the foundation for McLuhan infamous slogan “The Medium is the Message” and could serve as the starting point of historiography of the interrelatedness of human and media development.⁴

In this essay I use McLuhan’s claim that “The Medium Is the Message” to apply it to a trope of the extraterrestrial as used in science fiction writing and cinema in general, and by Walter Tevis in his novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and by Nick Roeg and his screenwriter Paul Mayersberg in their 1976 film adaptation of the Tevis novelistic source in particular. The extraterrestrial in science fiction brings together, not unlike the whole genre itself, the human scientific knowledge about the possible life and its inhabitants beyond our planet, and the imaginative constructs that provide this scientific insight with its popular manifestation and appeal. At the same time, the trope could also be defined, by using the normative constructions of difference within media history, as androgynous. By bringing together the technological aspects of science, traditionally constructed as a male domain, and imaginative fiction, perceived primarily as a female territory, the science fiction genre and its trope of the extraterrestrial signify as a hybrid, a medium with characteristics and appeals of an androgynous figure.⁵ The extraterrestrial is, then, a concept founded in the terrestrial knowledge supported by human imagination; it is a human notion of the extra-/Other extended beyond the human, terrestrial limitations. The extraterrestrial is to the terrestrial what the McLuhan’s concept of the medium is to the human senses—an extension, an extra incomprehensible without its companion, terrestrial source.

THE NOVEL EXTRATERRESTRIAL

In the Tevis novel Jerome Thomas Newton, an Anthean disguised as a human, an “Extraterrestrial humanoid” (Tevis, 133), arrives on Earth on a mission to save what is left of his planet from the draught and total destruction as a consequence of the nuclear wars held there. Newton’s secret plan is to build a giant space ship that will transport his family and the surviving Antheans to Earth in order to save them and, at the same time, take over the governmental institutions so that the life on Earth could be saved and the people of our planet could avoid the nuclear devastation and the destiny of the Antheans. In the novel we find out that on Anthea there were at one time three different intelligent species out of which only less than three hundred Antheans have survived (Tevis, 127-30). Antheans have over 10, 000 years of electronics, chemistry and optics, the technological knowledge that Newton brings with him to Earth which allows him to establish World Enterprises Corporation that made seventy-three consumer articles and the three hundred odd patents that it leased

out providing Newton with a financial power within a couple of years since his crashing on Earth (Tevis, 33). His Anthean background and history is a double-edge sword—it provides Newton with knowledge and intelligence that makes him stand apart among the humans as a sign of the future and the things to come for the human beings on Earth, and at the same time, as a warning sign of the pitfalls and dangers that that intelligence can produce. This is a member of the species that comes to Earth from different, outer space and different, future time to remind us, in the midst of the 1960s, of the Age of Reason and human mind’s limitless possibilities and, at the same time, of the legacy of WW1, and WW2’s Holocaust and atomic bomb, and the perpetual cold war, and the nuclear catastrophe looming over human destiny.

While preparing for his mission to come to Earth disguised as one of the humans Newton watched hours and hours of television programs available for transmission on Anthea. The 1960s television is a window to the real human world of the present moment—another looking glass-like extension of humanity through which we see, recognize and construct our selves, and through which Newton learned the human ways, language, values. Imitating the behavior seen on television Newton hopes to pass as human, which he initially does. His strangeness, however, becomes the shadow that followed him. His physical weakness manifested primarily in his legs and the difficulty of adapting to Earth’s gravity, his superior mind and intelligence coming from a different time zone of the future, and his asexual ways that appeared queer-like to the eye of heteronormativity made him a stranger in a world of strangers.

What makes Newton’s adaptation and acculturation to the earthly ways problematic is also his realization that the hours of television watching did not really prepare him for the humans he actually encounters. Newton realizes that the images of humanity transmitted on the television set screens were distortions of the real he meets on the streets of Haneyville, Louisville, Chicago, or New York City. The greed, loneliness, desperation, addiction, foolishness, guilt, need for redemption, suspicion, betrayal, weakness...the list of human foibles opened up for Newton and the humans became even more apart for a superior being from a superior race (Tevis, 89). When he tries to connect with a damaged human being, live-in maid Betty Jo, her sexual advances become another threat for a being whose sexuality is lights and years away from the human sexual violence. With a failed intimacy that relationship with Betty Jo brought, Newton realizes that his strangeness will remain his destiny on Earth, especially when his alien status and secret mission became the subject of the FBI inquiries and media reports. His stay on Earth, however, made him become more like the “unthinking humanity” (Tevis, 89) he surrounded himself with. Seduced by humanity’s weaknesses and a need to identify, to belong, Newton himself starts playing the role of one human being—by his isolation, substance abuse and addiction, and lack of purpose and strength. “I’m afraid that fellow needs help,” the bartender says at the very end of the novel looking at the drunk, crying creature leaning over the top of the bar table. The strange extraterrestrial turned, at the end of the novel, into yet another drunken and desperate human face unprepared to face the looming dangers of the future and things to come.

The cold war context during which the Tevis’s novel is



produced, with its looming nuclear devastation, informs the novel's content and its central message. The near future of 1972 [1985 in revised version] in which the novel's plot is set reminds the reader that the things to come as represented through the story line are just around the corner. Tevis's novel is, first and foremost, a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of a particular moment in human history with very real, dire consequences. The alien at the center of the novel becomes a sign of the human power to self destruct, including his environment. The extraterrestrial is the future of humanity that could be avoided if something drastic is done urgently, in the present.

CINEMATIC EXTRATERRESTRIAL

A lot has been said and written about David Bowie's performance as Thomas Jerome Newton in Nick Roeg's 1976 film adaptation of Tevis's novel. Almost unanimously, the first starring role in a major film of a major rock/pop star of the seventies has been praised as a perfect casting choice. With his androgynous stage persona and the public bisexual life style, Bowie seemed a perfect choice for a role of a terrestrial with that something extra to it.

Bowie's public persona is a technological invention on its own—his music is an extension of the rock sound and style that reaches out to pop resulting in a glam rock hybrid that appeals both to the hard-rock rockers and to the pop sound aficionados. Bowie's svelte figure is boyish and girlish, human and more/less than human, exposed and covered with make-up and costumes all at the same time; a spatial presence in time open to interpretation. Roeg's late 1970s big screen adaptation of the cold war sci-fi cautionary tale about the dangers of the nuclear disaster looming over Earth is contextualized within the post-radical 1960s civil rights and hippy movement and turns into a story of human freedom and individualism as seen through that generation's experimentation with drugs and sex. Roeg's "strategy of omission"⁶ in adapting the literary source shifts the novel's focus from the nuclear disaster to the sexual expression of the encounter between extraterrestrial Newton and the earthly goddess, now called Mary Lou, and their intercultural dynamics.

The historical time, delineated in the novel by the exact years and by the passing of time, clearly establishes the notions of the past, present and future, the before and after, the cause and the effect. In McLuhan's media map of human history the book era favors analytical and linear thinking but also, because of the printing technology, makes the content and information mass produced and shared among larger groups of people such as a nation or a religious community (McLuhan, 145-50; 155-62). In the movie there is never a clear demarcation of time. Based on the visual signifiers such as clothing, cars, interior design, hair styles and technological gadgets, the movie is very much situated in its decade of production, in the present time of the shifting from radicalism of the sixties into the pop and glam eclecticism of the early 1970s. Roeg's "deliberately defamiliarising directorial style"⁷ treats the space in a similar vein like time—what looks like a flashback may as well be the flash-forward; what seems to be taking place on the planet Anthea may just be a desert on earth, or a figment of character's imagination. The visual mosaic of Roeg's film adaptation of Tevis's novel is a result of the shift from the printing age to the electronic age, which McLuhan perceives as "an extension of the central nervous system."⁸ In the age of a global village, the attacks of the media on all our human

senses at the same time results in "a simultaneous happening" (McLuhan and Fiore, 63) of which Roeg's films from the seventies in general, and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* in particular, seem to be an exemplary manifestation.

The differences between the media epochs of print and the electronic age, which gave rise to the film medium, could be related to the differences in the treatment of the sexual content in Tevis's novel and in Roeg and Mayersberg's adaptation of it for the big screen. In the novel the sex act between Newton and Betty Jo never occurs; in the film the sexual, however, becomes the major marker of the cultural difference between humans and extraterrestrials and central for understanding human relations. What seems to make Anthans superior to us is their utopian sense of the sexual and gender equality. In a scene in which Newton takes off all of his disguises, used to make him pass as a human to Mary Lou and others, and exposes in his full nakedness the lack of any distinct, gender-based genitalia, we are back to the beginning of the film in which the Extraterrestrial as Nosferatu descends to Earth suggesting the horror genre's Undead. Mary Lou is horrified by the image of a male human lacking the signifier of its maleness, the phallus. After the first shock, she brings herself to come to the bed on which the naked Extraterrestrial is waiting for her. The "Alien Orgasm" scene that follows demonstrates the Anthan sex as the non-genital, whole body as erogenous zone sex, without the human sexual violence leading toward the climatic moment provided by the penetrative, phallic sex. Unaccustomed to the whole body as pleasure and source of ejaculative secretions of sexual activity, Mary Lou runs out of the bedroom and into the arms of the sexually adventurous, promiscuous professor Bryce who, as we have seen throughout the film, possesses a penis and is happy to share it with his female students.

As already mentioned, the casting of Bowie as the extraterrestrial proves to be a brilliant choice especially when it comes to the sexual content and contact between the story's species. As Adam Roberts has noted "this film not only stars Bowie, it *construes* Bowie, or a version of Bowie that remains potent and recognizable—recognizably estranging" (Roberts, 159). Bowie's extraterrestrial becomes a visual medium that connects the human and the alien, this world and the world out there, the now and the future, erasing the limitations of human time and space not unlike any other telecommunication device. Bowie's persona, as construed and cemented by this performance, is the message of pop/rock eclecticism at its best: part harlequin, part dandy from outer space, part man, part woman, human when perceived from one angle and super human from another, alive human, dead celebrity and undead god all rolled in one, this pastiche's all-lure is in its endless possibility of combinations of its parts paired with a range of different contexts.

Unlike Tevis's novel that centers on the trope of the alien as a sign of impending nuclear devastation that may end the life on Earth as we know it, Nick Roeg made a movie about an alien "with a strange and totemic aura" (Roberts, 158) that is already among us but seemingly not one of us—the movie centered on the present future of humanity ruled and dominated by the pop stars and the need to become one, or like one, by any means necessary.

The extraterrestrial, which appeared as an ambiguous extension of humanity's scientific knowledge and its imaginative capabilities in the 1960s in a printed form as a cautionary tale,

reappears in the late 1970s, with Nick Roeg's fragmented, disjointed, pop and psychedelic cinematic narrative, transformed into a postmodern signifier of the dystopian future of the humanity that is present, the future in which we all are stars/star-like, alien to ourselves and to our neighbors, just like David Bowie's public persona of the "self-styled Leper Messiah"⁹ and his extraterrestrial Thomas Jerome Newton. The present future is mediated through this iconic, stylish, pale, lonely, skinny, rich, reclusive, helpless, hopeless, superstar celebrity (Starman!) who's done it all, seen it all, too high up for the low life of humanity, too similar to the humans to be Christ-like, with no ambitions, no strength, no drive and no purpose, lost at the bar table, wearing a fedora, looking glamorous, with a few extra drinks, in need of help that may show up on the many television screens, serving as substitutes for the windows in the buildings in which we now live, in a form of Dr. Phil's TV show in which a lot of talking is done but nothing is really said.

The multiple TV screens are the most prominent media visible in the Roeg's film. There are many other media, as human extensions, featured in the film starting with a space vehicle breaking through the atmosphere and crashing on earth at the beginning of the film, to the elevators, cars, helicopters, trains and planes that mediate between spatial, and even time, zones. Then, there are media of communication such as typewriters, books, radio, vinyl, stereo, telephones, microphones, computers (which show up only within a dialogue about the alternatives to the human mind in the future). In a film about an interplanetary encounter the image technologies and media as extensions of human eyes get a center stage placement—mirrors are present in almost every frame, many characters wear glasses (when the FBI agents raid the apartment of Oliver Farnsworth, played by Buck Henry, and one of them takes away his eye glasses he screams back: "Those are my eyes!") and the extraterrestrial hides his real alien eyes behind contact lenses, photos and photo cameras are visible throughout the movie, microscopes and telescopes get their moment too.

It is television, however, that gets the star treatment among media competing for the top credit with the pop star in the movie's title role. A television screen enters the movie quietly, as just one of the many electronic devices visible in the home of Oliver Farnsworth, a lawyer specializing in electronic patents, and then centrally placed in the homes of other characters. When Thomas Jerome Newton moves into a hotel room in New Mexico he asks for television to be brought in; soon we see four TV sets with different programs on each—from cartoons to classic Hollywood, to animal shows, to news. From the conversation between Newton and professor Bryce later in the movie we find out that Newton learned how to pass as human, and lot of other things about life on planet Earth, from watching television back home. Coming to Earth is like entering the tube for Newton. It seems, however, that he was in for a surprise—the Earth life he learned about from the TV screens back home wasn't much like the one surrounding him. Isolating himself inside a mediascape full of TV sets (later in a movie Newton is seen in a room sitting in front of the twelve TV sets "wall") may be the alien's way of coping with the reality of human life. Television, as Newton tells Bryce, shows all and tells nothing; TV is about "pattern recognition"¹⁰ and not about thinking or sustained feeling. By becoming the Visitor's medium of preference, television could be seen

as his way of killing time in the waiting room of earth while the space ship is to be built so he can return to Anthea and save his family, and/or the way the process of humanization of the alien takes place.

Television is also a medium that in the sixties and the seventies contributed to the making of pop and media stars and celebrities. Bowie himself created his queer persona through his stage personas, in concerts and records, in his media interviews proclaiming his bisexuality, and in his television appearances. Casting him as an extraterrestrial in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* is the summit of the process that made him "a one-man collective of media personae,"¹¹ a spectacular explosion of pop stardom whose particles keep sparkling into the twenty-first century. So, when Bowie as Newton finally appears on one of the TV screens his alien had surrounded himself with (first in an ad for the World Enterprises Corporation photo camera and then as the Visitor from outer space making the news and media frenzy once his alien identity goes public) the blurring between the Starman and the star is complete. From that moment on the television sets are disappearing from the screen because we are, together with the Visitor, inside the tube turned inside out. What's been projecting is the first reality TV show about an extraterrestrial's life on Earth which turns out to be a pilot episode for Stars in Rehab series. The main (only?) difference, from our, thirty years later, perspective is the satirical tone present in Roeg's rendering of the subject and its absence in the current crop of repetitious, predictable, vapid celebrity inhabited reality TV shows.

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NOTES

- 1 In the original, 1963 edition the year of the near future is 1972 and the action ends in 1976; the revised version's action starts in 1985 and ends in year 1990. Walter Tevis, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Greenwich, CT: Gold Medal Books, 1963).
- 2 Walter Tevis, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963; London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1999), 6–7. Hereafter cited in text.
- 3 *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, dir. Nicholas Roeg, 1976, DVD, Anchor Bay Entertainment Inc., 2003.
- 4 For an aesthetics of media transition see David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, eds., *Rethinking Media Change: An Aesthetics of Transition* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), in particular their "Introduction"; also, Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: A Signet Book, 1964).
- 5 Lisa Gitelman applies the normative construction of difference in her discussion on the history of amusement phonograph, see her "How Users Define New Media: A History of the Amusement Phonograph," Thorburn and Jenkins, eds., *Rethinking Media Change*, 79.
- 6 James Leach, "The Man who Fell to Earth: Adaptation by Omission," *Literature Film Quarterly* 6, 4 (Fall 1978): 371–79; 373.
- 7 Adam Roberts, A Review of the Optimum DVD Releasing of the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Science Fiction Film and TV*, 1, 1 (2008): 158. Hereafter cited in text.
- 8 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 40. Hereafter cited in text.
- 9 Mark Booth, *Camp* (London: Quartet Books, 1983), 162.
- 10 This is a claim by Neil Postman stated in a conversation with Camille Paglia in "Two Cultures—Television versus Print," *Communication in History* (5th ed., eds. David Crowley and Paul Heyer, Boston: Pearson, 2007), 289.
- 11 David Buckley in *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, quoted in Loughlin, Gerard, "The Man Who Fell to Earth," *Theology and Sexuality* 13 (2000): 92–118.

Toronto International Film Festival

TIFF



The dominatrix

Special Treatment/ Sans queue ni tête

by FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

Special Treatment/Sans queue ni tête is a sophisticated film about urban life that deserves more notice than it received at this year's TIFF. While the film isn't a comedy, it is imbued with a wry humour and a tone that is mature and aware. It offers two lead performances that are understated, almost minimalist, and remarkable for encouraging the viewer to participate in producing a reading of the characters through subtlety, nuance and gesture.

The film focuses on two characters, a psychotherapist, Xavier Demestre/ Bulli Lanners and a prostitute Alice Bergerac/ Isabelle Huppert who are reexamining the value and meaning of their respective work and their lives. Although the film does point out similarities between the two professions, it is not a simple comparison or indictment of either one. Instead, the film makes a broader statement about a culture rooted in money and exchange. It suggests, in a Godardian sense that we live in a society where everyone prostitutes themselves in one form or another by doing things explicitly for money, for the accumulation of goods. Capitalist culture values professionals who easily earn large sums of money for their services which in turn inflates their sense of self-importance and empowerment. This self-centered, heightened consumerism discourages generosity, empathy or compassion for others and, as the film points out, inevitably leads to an alienation from the self. Along

the way one loses sight of relationships, of engaging in a community for reasons other than the accumulation of commodities that validate one's identity and whose use is solely for one's own pleasure and enjoyment.

Objects and Desire

Both Alice Bergerac and Xavier Demestre have busy professional lives servicing the needs of their clients. Both, for various reasons, begin to find their work tiresome and no longer satisfying. In part this is fuelled by the end result of the work: the pleasure derived from the objects bought with the money earned is, in itself, no longer enough to keep either character happy. The film opens with an image of a golden bowl that Alice covets. She calculates the price in terms of how many clients it will cost—including the owner of the antique shop who exchanges the bowl for a session with Alice. It is important to Alice that she controls the terms of the service she is selling and that the relationships remain impersonal. When the shop owner oversteps his place as a client, perhaps regretting what he has exchanged, and compliments Alice sardonically for her good taste (referring ambiguously to both him and the bowl), she resets the parameters of the relationship with her quick retort, "Apparently not I slept with you", and refuses to allow him to return at any price. At a cocktail party early on in the film some of the therapists assembled discuss their patients (the obsessive, the paranoid) objectifying them in terms of their buying value, a display of callousness that angers Xavier's wife/Valérie Dréville who is also a therapist. This attitude also encourages a dependence on the therapist and lengthy treatment. For Alice, clients are bowls and chandeliers; for Xavier they offer him the leisure of collecting art objects at auctions, like the statue of the renaissance angel he pursues.

Xavier's problems are not identical to Alice's (which in part is dictated by gender differences). In his own quiet way, Xavier exudes an inflated sense of self worth and has become indifferent to the needs of his patients. One patient compares him to a father figure and comments on how the doctor seems notably less happy than he is. In one scene a man, mistaking Xavier's room for another in the hotel where he is staying, comes to fit him for a cardinal's hat, underlying the theme of the therapist's overblown ego. Another patient, a male who cross-dresses, makes comments about whether the doctor is wet or dry that point to Xavier's problems with his own repressed sexuality which the narrative supports. Xavier's attempts to express his sexual needs are unsuccessful; in one nocturnal scene (which seems to pay homage to Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*) Xavier follows the instructions on an invitation that arrives under his hotel door that leads him to a sex club, which takes on the semblance of a nightmare from which he soon escapes. When he meets Alice for their first session he coughs awkwardly which elicits Alice's remark, "Something stuck?" To the film's credit Xavier's unhappiness is hinted at rather than explained and the film never attempts to fully disclose and account for his melancholy. It suggests that Xavier sublimates his sexual needs onto the objects he collects; Xavier's compulsive hand washing or the moment when he bursts into tears implies that he is fragile and vulnerable.

Alice is a prostitute who is aging and is beginning to doubt her ability to offer her clients what they seek— a fantasy that will

instantly excite them, enacted in a safe, discreet environment. At one point when Alice is preparing for the role she will play for her next appointment, she looks in the mirror and notices signs of aging; she later offers to recommend someone younger to her client who is having trouble getting aroused. Alice demonstrates her professionalism in the way she directs the fantasy and creates the environment for her clientele, safeguarding her privacy and her self which is not included in the exchange. (The film's publicity material focuses on Isabelle Huppert as a figure of desire presented in her various guises: the schoolgirl, the dominatrix, the sophisticate.) Part of what begins to unnerve Alice are the elements she cannot control: the potential for violence underlying some of the sexual fantasies, like the 'husband' who begins to become violent (off screen) in a manner that erases the boundaries set by the fantasy of the obedient, passive wife who is scrutinized and punished. There is another scene where Alice, dressed as a 'punk' dominatrix, prepares a bowl of raw liver, a chalk outline of a body found at a crime scene and practices adjusting a mouth gag. The scene is abrupt, as if it was intended to be longer and was cut, but its import is in dramatizing the potential for violence that risks exceeding the boundaries Alice sets. Alice's freedom to be an independent entrepreneur becomes harder to assert; she begins to feel threatened and no longer confident that she is able to securely define and direct the half hour she is selling. Alice is also becoming disengaged, defining herself at one point as "empty armour, a numb body but the brain still works". To some extent Alice, like Xavier, displaces her sense of emptiness with the treasures she buys to fill her apartment.

Ironically the two professionals meet one day in the medical supply store. Xavier is attracted to Alice, mistaking her for another therapist or physician and asks a colleague who she is and decides, as he is separated, to call her. Alice sets the terms of the relationship: she chastises him for calling outside of business hours. When they meet preliminarily in a hotel bar, Xavier wants to imagine he is on a date with a woman to whom he is attracted; instead, Alice carefully and thoroughly explains the terms and choices of the packages she offers. For the first session Alice agrees to play the role of the sophisticated urban bourgeoisie; she pulls out the same newspaper he is reading, *Le Monde*, and offers to discuss a new book on the demise of psychoanalysis. When this fails to work (Xavier comments that her taste in clothing reminds him of his wife), Alice decides that Xavier needs something different; she arrives for the following session dressed in more stereotypical hooker attire and proceeds to jump on him. This proves equally futile and the rejection intensifies Alice's insecurities about her waning desirability. Ultimately both agree that they are tired and unhappy with playing a role that leaves them feeling alienated and share a hug as a gesture of consolation and mutual understanding. In some ways this confession is the film's turning point; Xavier is finally able to admit to his own unhappiness and relate to another person openly and directly. It is after this that Xavier calls his wife (there is a suggestion of a reconciliation) and Alice finds a therapist with whom she feels comfortable, sensing he is genuine.

The statue of the angel which circulates between the main characters is more than a narrative conceit; it signifies the importance of generosity and interchanges that are not based on commerce, trade and self-indulgence. Xavier is outbid for it



at a charity auction, but the successful buyer, another therapist, Pierre Cassagne/Richard Debuisne trades the angel for Xavier's less valuable purchase because, he explains, the things in themselves have no value beyond their role of fundraising for the charity. Xavier is taken aback but is impressed by the doctor's novel attitude. He later recommends him as a therapist to Alice, based on this gesture. Xavier gives Alice the angel as an expression of appreciation for having helped him. When it arrives, Alice's friend Juliette/Sabila Moussadek asks if it's the chandelier, a term used earlier in reference to Xavier. At the end of the film Alice sends it to the therapist as an expression of gratitude for helping her move towards achieving her desires. He in turn gives it to one of his patients, oblivious to its value beyond something that can make someone happy.

The Aftermath

In the film's denouement, Alice confronts Dr. Cassagne who refuses to take her on as a patient. In an outburst uncharacteristic of her usual composure she accuses the doctor of rejecting her on moral principle, because her money is earned through prostitution. While she waits for him to return from his rounds she is comforted by one of the hospital patients, Bruno, who gently consoles her, "Don't cry, Alice". He tries but is unsuccessful in getting her a cup of coffee, and Alice calms down and perhaps realizes that the doctor's decision that she doesn't need therapy is scrupulous and just; it is not personal or a com-

ment on the inutility of the profession, just as Alice's decision to move on is not a judgment on prostitution. Alice's friend Juliette is a sex worker who seems content and centered. When one of Juliette's clients becomes aroused after his time is up she agrees to have sex with him because she is making a decision to help him that is not based on time and money. The psychiatrist who helps Alice is discerning when therapy is necessary and when it is an indulgence that is immoral if its sole purpose is to enrich the therapist and disempower the person seeking help. At first I thought the film's ending, in which the doctor refers Alice to a new job related to her field of art history was too easy a resolution; however, the film's final shot of Alice looking almost directly at the camera suggests that the psychiatrist has simply redirected Alice back to herself, giving her the self-confidence to understand that she has the strength and tenacity she needs to change her life.

The film's French title, *Sans queue ni tête*, is somewhat more mercurial than the film's English title *Special Treatment*. The latter refers one to the professions of both lead protagonists; the French title, the expression *sans queue ni tête* is more elusive. It means something illegible, incoherent, that doesn't easily make sense. It is the more interesting title because it points to the question of living in a culture that evaluates social relations, success and happiness in terms of price, leaving one ultimately with a sense of meaninglessness and melancholy for which one cannot fully account.

Film Socialisme

JEAN-LUC GODARD
AND THE CINEMA

by RICHARD LIPPE

"Godard's career combines an unflagging resistance to the demands of the industry with a recurrent commitment to cinema as art, classic and yet personal."¹ Peter Wollen

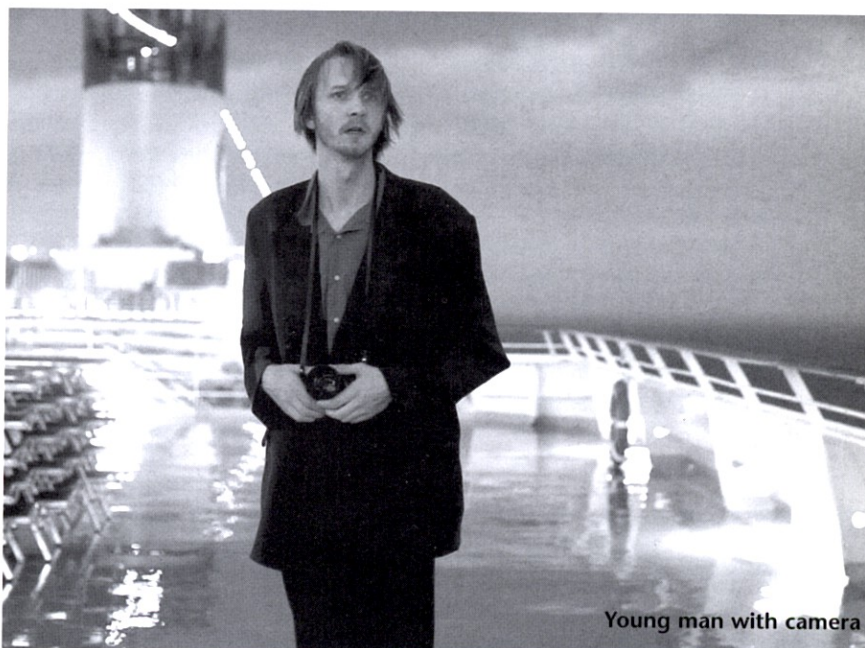
Film Socialisme (2010) is Godard's first theatrical release to be shot completely in HD video. Another first, the film's subtitles aren't rendered into sentence form; instead, they consist of a few key words that are relevant to conveying what is being said by a character(s) or in the voiceover narration. (I have been told by people who speak French that knowing the language doesn't add much to what the subtitles say.) Godard refers to these subtitles as being in "Navajo English" perhaps as a humorous reference to Hollywood westerns which often present verbal communication between Native Americans and whites with a minimal use of words. In any case, the subtitles, after you get use to them, can be eloquent in their succinctness; at other times, they may engage but remain baffling.

Film Socialisme is divided into three movements: *Des choses comme ça* ("Such things"); *Notre Europe* ("Our Europe"); *Nos humanités* ("Our humanities"). It frequently offers mere fragmentations of narrative, of thoughts or ideas and, as other Godard films, it functions on numerous interconnecting levels: the intellect, the aesthetic, the political, and the emotional. His work often has the ability to communicate to the viewer, through, for instance, an image even when it is difficult to fully grasp its significance in the context in which it exists. And, as a Godard work, it's about image and sound, the usage of film as a means of documenting, storytelling and essay writing.

Despite the challenges it poses to the viewer, *Film Socialisme* has coherence. As the film functions best as a series of individual meditations on Europe and its present day life and past history, I will address its three movements. Preceding the film's first movement, there is a close shot of two parrots in a tropical forest, followed by the shot of an ocean. In the first and second movements, several animals appear. Like the birds, the respective presence of these animals can be read as having literal and/or metaphorical meaning: two cats intently communicate by meowing back and forth to each other (according to Amy Taubin², the image is taken from a YouTube video); there is a shot of a camel with a television strapped on its back; a llama and a donkey are treated as domesticated pets but are kept on a leash.



Passenger on deck



Young man with camera



The boy conductor

1) *Des choses comme ça* ("Such things")

The first movement takes place on a huge ocean liner cruise ship that, touring the Mediterranean, makes stops at ports in Egypt, Hellas, Odessa, Naples and Barcelona.

Godard cuts between shot of actors as a 'presence' and others as fictitious narrative 'characters' with shots of real-life passengers on the ship. The 'characters' are aligned to differing 'narrative' threads that have social-political content: for example, there is a vivacious and beautiful young woman who seems to be the governess of a teenage German boy who, at one point, interrogates his uncle (?) regarding his dealings in WWII —the woman may or may not be the elderly man's mistress; a Russian woman who, seen solely in her cabin, intently talks about concerns dealing with her country. These 'characters' and others reappear; but, their respective scenes, while intriguing, are too cryptic to fully engage the viewer.

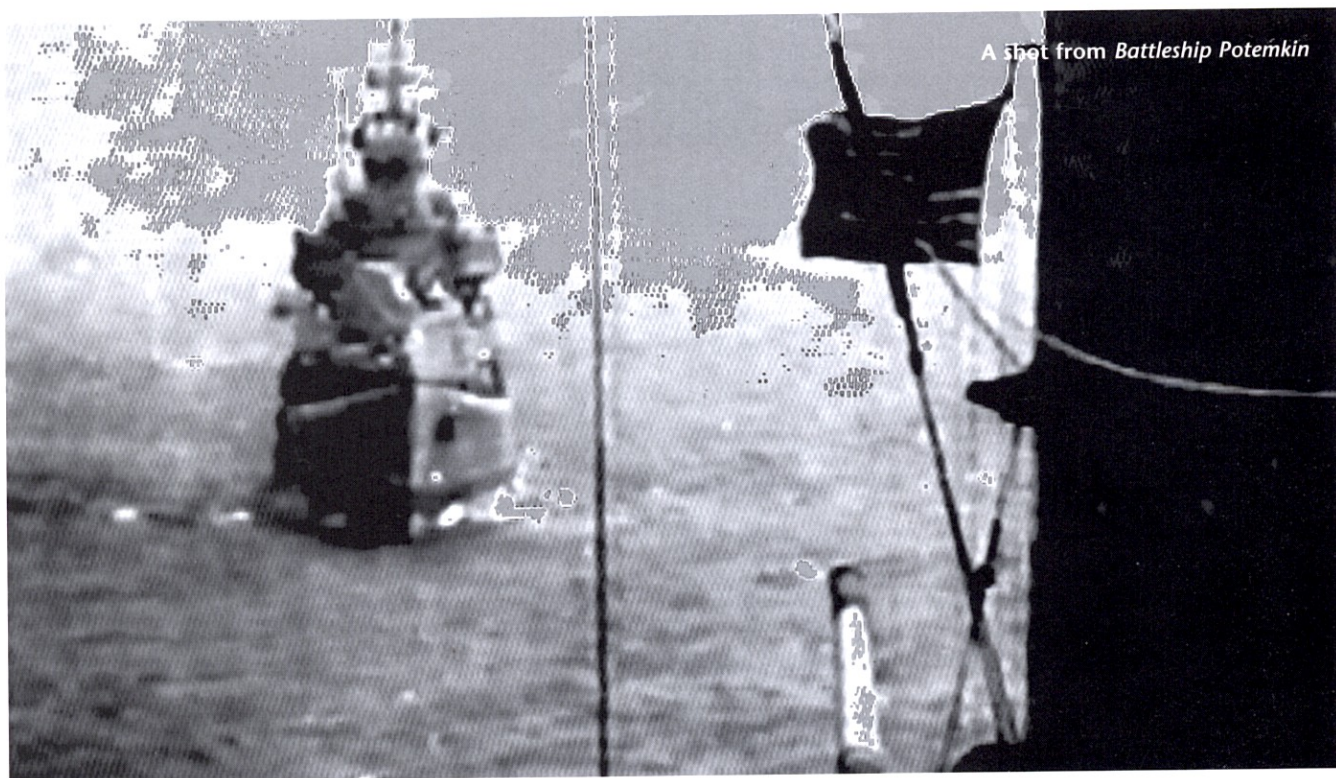
In contrast, we have the images that document the various activities of the real-life passengers. These shots record the day-to-day existence of the passengers: mindlessly exercising to pop music, sitting around an indoor swimming pool, playing bingo, drinking in bars, nightclubbing, casino gambling, attending a religious service, eating. Unlike the 'characters', some of whom are photographed on the ship's spacious deck, the passengers are repeatedly seen in overly crowded interior settings. (Ironically they are immune to the grandeur of the ocean.) Despite their seemingly constant activity and communal experiences, the passengers don't appear to be enjoying themselves or fully relate to what they are doing. Godard reinforces this perception with his use of the Patti Smith 'character'; we see her initially in her cabin rehearsing and, later, walking through a lobby-like area performing for passengers who seem not to notice her. The

commentary isn't critical of the passengers themselves (as suggested in a poignant shot of a disengaged elderly couple eating their dinner in silence); rather, it points towards the mechanical lives we live in contemporary capitalist society.

The alienation that pervades "Such things" is heightened through Godard's filming techniques. In addition to pixelated cell-phone footage, low grade video images, gaudy colour enhancements, he uses a highly dense soundtrack that includes the piercing sound of high wind, and numerous jarring cuts. The effect produced is harsh and grating, putting the viewer on edge. In stark contrast, there are HD images of activity on deck, both day and night. These pristine shots that are beautiful in their clarity, composition and vibrant colour; one of the most striking is a long shot of a woman jogging on a windy, sunny morning that is dominated by white, yellows and blues. Also, Godard uses a number of exhilarating tracking shots of the waves produced presumably by the ship as it glides though the water. In fact, the act of photographing is specially referenced in this movement. On the ship's deck, a young man, who isn't seen connecting to anybody, is periodically seen taking photographs at random; and, below deck, the ship's staff members are seen taking posed group shots of passengers. Each of these still photographs records a moment in time which, as the film's third movement suggests, can be seen as a moment in the history of Western civilization.

2) *Notre Europe* ("Our Europe")

The second movement of *Film Socialisme*, in contrast to the first, has a loose narrative. The story is centred on the Martin family who live in a rural area of France where they run a gas station/garage. The family is composed of a father, a mother



A shot from *Battleship Potemkin*

and two children, a young daughter on the brink of adulthood and a son, about nine years old. The movement begins with the father in the middle of a monologue on their bleak financial situation. Soon after, two women arrive by car, a reporter and her cameraperson, the latter a black woman dressed in an outfit suggesting army fatigues. They have come to do an interview with the mother as she is running for public office in an upcoming election. With their arrival, the narrative shifts from the father to the mother, the reporters, and then onto the children. In "Our Europe" women and children take centre stage. The children respectively embody primary concerns of the film: the daughter initially bored and indifferent (she ignores the reporters when they arrive, concentrating on reading Balzac while being flanked by a llama who is tethered to one of the gas station pumps) later asserts, in conversation with the reporters and then her mother, a belief in holding values that benefit humankind. Her idealism is at odds with the adults—the cynicism of the reporters and the disillusionment of her mother who thinks her daughter is being naïve.

While the daughter is aligned to intellect and questioning, the son is defined by creativity and self-assertion, with both children representing elements of Godard. Taubin, suggests that Godard indicates that the boy is his alter ego. She basis this claim on: a) the boy, when asked by the black reporter if "he is really eyeing her derrière" as he has just claimed, says "No comment."; b) the film ends with the written words "No comment," in response to the image of an FBI warning sticker on a video cassette, a reference to the issue of ownership vs. the shared accessibility to creativity/ideas. Taubin doesn't mention the film's final image; instead, she connects its concluding words to *Film Socialisme's* third movement which deals with Western

civilization and its ongoing history of war and oppression. She reads "Our humanities" as Godard's despairing attitude towards the future and possible departure from filmmaking. In doing so, Taubin tends to ignore the second movement which she herself acknowledges as having moments that are tender and lyrical. These moments deal with the bonding/ communication between parent and child. In the first, the father is seen sitting in an armchair with the daughter crouched close at his side. The shot is medium close, deep focus. It is beautifully composed and lit with an emphasis on colour—a red jacket covered book in the foreground, a green vase sitting on a table in the mid-ground and a pale yellow glow of a lamp in the background of the image. On the soundtrack, we hear classical music, the majestic voices of a choral group. The shot is intimate but majestic because of its background music; in the second instance, which takes place in a cluttered kitchen with the mother at the sink washing dishes, the boy, standing several feet away and pretending to be blind, walks slowly towards her, groping to make contact. As he begins to touch her, she turns to embrace him. Both shots are long takes without dialogue exchanges. The first shot is more formal in its composition and more reserved, but both shots depict a genuine shared affection and love. These shots are meditative but powerfully convey a positive energy.

In the film's second movement, Godard places emphasis on art, creativity and pleasure. There are two shots in which the boy expresses himself through music. In the first instance, a sombre moment, he is seen sitting alone pretending to conduct an orchestra and, as he becomes more engaged, we begin to hear the classical music that is being played in his head; in the second, the boy, sipping a drink through a straw, begins to



Patti Smith rehearses

playfully sip in a rhythmical manner. As he continues, he is accompanied by a jazz piece on the soundtrack. Godard, with the use of a close up, calls attention to the delight the boy experiences through his invention.

In contrast to the film's other movements, "Our Europe" is leisurely paced and employs a number of long takes with a stationary camera. Its mise-en-scène is attuned to the pace of the rural surroundings and the lives of the Martin family. The reporters, more of a nuisance than an intrusion, aren't treated as negative figures. They are eventually sent packing by the boy who tires of their presence.

"Our Europe" is a bridge between "Such things" and "Our humanities." Placed at the film's centre, it is a counterpoint to what has been seen and follows. The movement has an ease of feeling and conveys vulnerability on Godard's part that isn't often seen in his work.

"Nos humanités" ("Our humanities")

The first movement of the film is bracketed by a young African woman; seen on the deck of the cruise ship, she, in its final shot, ponders the future of Europe, saying "Poor Europe" and wishes it well. "Our humanities" revisits the places where the cruise ship docked in the first movement. In doing so, the movement addresses: Western civilization, history/politics and art, in particular the cinema. In dealing with Egypt, Godard presents ethnographic images of its cultural artifacts, reminding us of its heritage. The display of Egyptian artifacts is followed by an explicit reference to the cinema (Godard's means to create and communicate) and its ability to visually narrate on film the horrors that have been perpetuated by mankind through the ages. Evoking his *Historie(s) du cinéma* (1989-98), he offers a montage of very brief excerpts from numerous films including Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956), John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Italian neo-realists films; the latter two, both dealing with the 20th century, are given a fuller attention. Godard, using shots from Eisenstein's Odessa Steps sequence, intercuts these shots with images of the present day Odessa Steps which, with people causally milling around, looks like a tourist attraction. In contrast to the attempted revolution depicted in *Battleship Potemkin*, the neo-realist footage deals with the 1945 liberation of Italy by the Americans who, in turn, impose a democracy that is intimately shaped by capitalism. Through the voiceover narration, Godard questions whether capitalism's 'democracy' can be substituted for a genuine liberation from fascism.

"Our humanities" because of its concentration on oppression and density of image is the most forceful of the film's three movements. Yet Godard, in the movement's concluding moments, leaves us with a lyrical image: taken from Agnès Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès/The Beaches of Agnès* (2008); it depicts two trapeze artists, a man and a woman, performing together on a beach with the Mediterranean ocean in view in the background. Godard freeze frames the image when, in mid-air, they reach towards each other.

Notes

- 1 Wollen, Peter. *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film*. London: Verso, 2002: 92
- 2 Taubin, Amy. "Film Socialisme", *Film Comment*, Volume 46/Number 5, (September/October 2010): 44-46.

In Transit

KELLY REICHARDT'S *MEEK'S CUTOFF*

by SUSAN MORRISON

Spoiler Alert: In the course of this paper I discuss the film's ending.

I saw more films this year at the Toronto International Film Festival than I have been able to in past years and while there were lots that were notable, I wasn't captivated by any one film. Throughout the 2 weeks (actually 4 as press screenings begin in mid-August prior to the September opening day), I would ask people to recommend films they considered strong, which is how I arrived at a public screening of Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* on the second last day of the festival. I hadn't found her previous film, *Old Joy* (2006), particularly interesting and had missed *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) altogether. The recommendation plus my curiosity at seeing what an art house director like Kelly Reichardt was doing in (and would do with) the Wild West that was mid-nineteenth century Oregon prompted my presence in the theatre. My response? After a while, the initial novelties of both its idiosyncratic visual style and its minimalist narrative, which follows the meanderings of a small wagon train heading west to the Willamette Valley, wore thin. When the film ended, I went into denial like everyone else around me; surely that wasn't the ending...it couldn't end like that, could it? And left the theatre mildly annoyed and curious as to what anyone saw in it.

I thought no more about it until two weeks later, as I began to watch an old cowboy movie on TCM called *The Way West* (1967), that I realized with a shock that it was in essence an Ur-version of *Meek's Cutoff*. Covering the same territory, both literally and metaphorically, *The Way West* documents a journey taken by a wagon train traveling from Missouri across the plains and over the old Oregon trail to end at the Columbia River, the gateway to the promised land of the fertile Willamette Valley. In stark contrast to *Meek's Cutoff*, here was to be found everything that had been expunged from Reichardt's fiercely indie film: wide-screen panavision format, big stars (Kirk Douglas, Robert Mitchum, Richard Widmark), character development, action, drama, romance, a beginning and an ending, etc. Granted, it's not a great film (TCM gave it only 1 star); nevertheless, it is an interesting take on the classic western, mostly because of its mildly unconventional narrative, and, in the end, it does 'do what a film's gotta do', to paraphrase a catchphrase of the classic Western: flesh out a satisfying story for its viewers.

In light of this, *Meek's Cutoff* took on a new interest for me and I started to rethink my initial lack of response to the film. Here was provided the possibility of using *The Way West* as a foil to open up those areas of difference in *Meek's Cutoff*. The question (and quest) for me became one of trying to situate the tropes, conceits and peculiarities that constitute *Meek's Cutoff* in a generic context as a western in order to tease out Reichardt's take on the form. In a similar way, the historical record has to be taken into account. While the events in *The Way West* are pure fiction, based on a 1949 Pulitzer-prize winning novel by A.B. Guthrie Jr., those in *Meek's Cutoff* are not.¹ The film's title

and general storyline refer to a well-known and well-documented incident in the history of the Oregon Trail. My purpose is not to measure the film against fact for historical accuracy—after all, it's not a documentary—but to use the historical fact to mark out and expose the changes made in its transcription from fact to fiction.

Historical background of the Meek Cutoff²

Prior to 1846, Oregon was not part of the United States, but a region jointly occupied by the US and Great Britain that included present-day states of Oregon, Washington, Wyoming and Montana in addition to the province of British Columbia. This area had been initially explored and 'claimed' by the Hudson's Bay Company whose trade-centred forts dotted the landscape, as well as American missionaries intent on converting the pagan Indians. It was not until 1841 that the great migration west of American settlers in covered wagon trains began in earnest. The influx of settlers from the east was seen as an attempt on the part of the US to populate the territory with Americans and thus claim it solely for itself, a tactic that proved successful.³ By 1846, the boundary dispute was settled between the US and Great Britain, and Oregon became part of the United States.

In early spring 1845, a mountain man and former trapper named Stephen Meek was hired on as pilot to lead a wagon train along the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri to Oregon, a trip of approximately 2000 miles. This wagon train was one of many proceeding west at this time, seeking the fertile land in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Although the train's destination was The Dalles, Oregon, (from whence they would have to travel by raft down the Columbia River to the Willamette Valley), Meek's services were terminated at Fort Hall, Idaho. Meek (and wife [!]) then rode on to Fort Boise on the dividing line between Idaho and Oregon, where he proposed to the wagon trains gathered there that he could save them time on the last leg of their journey by taking a shortcut and avoiding the dreaded Blue Mountains.⁴ In all, some 200 families (between

1000–1500 people) followed him in a number of wagon trains. On August 25, 1845 they left the Oregon Trail and followed Meek southwest on what turned out to be a difficult trek across desert-like terrain that added 40 days and some 400 miles to the original journey. The eventual lack of food, water and grass for the livestock resulted in rampant illness and some loss of life among both humans and accompanying animals. Much anger was directed towards Meek for misleading the settlers. Meek left the train just prior to the end of the trip, the rumor being that he had been threatened with death by a father who had lost 2 sons along the way. By the time the wagons arrived at their destination at The Dalles, 23 people had died, and another 24 more would die later from the effects of the trip.

***The Way West* (1967)**

The narrative of this film is set in 1846, the year following the Meek Cutoff incident. There are three main characters: Mr Tadlock/Kirk Douglas, a former state senator whose dream is to create a new 'ideal' city in Oregon. The trek west is his idea. He has assembled the wagons in Independence Missouri, and is elected captain, but his arrogance and authoritarian attitudes lead to his eventual replacement by the well-liked Lije Evans/Richard Widmark. Evans is a farmer whose disinclination to stay in one place drives his decision to keep his family moving west to Oregon from Missouri. His friend, Dick Summers/Robert Mitchum, is a 'mountain man' hired on to pilot the wagon train. A subplot involves Evans' teenage son, Brownie, who falls in love with the enticing Mercy McBee/Sally Field along the way, eventually marrying her in transit even though she's pregnant by another man.⁵ The voyage west is marked out with the daily tasks of men and women, both domestic and travel-related, such as fording rivers and winching wagons down steep mountainsides. Indians are seen as nuisances mostly, savages who steal clothing, horses and cattle from the travelers. When one of the travelers, Mr Mack, inadvertently kills an Indian boy, the tribal chief demands justice. Rather than giving



Meek's Cutoff

the white man over to the Indians for punishment, Mr Tadlock insists on hanging Mr Mack himself, a decision that ultimately leads to his overthrow as captain as well as eventual (quite spectacular) death at the hands of Mr Mack's unsettled wife. The film ends with the wagons' arrival at the Columbia River, where the settlers board rafts that will take them to their destination down river. Summers chooses to return to the mountains rather than follow them to the Willamette Valley.

The Way West is not about the Meek cutoff, although in the novel, Stephen Meek is mentioned as a possible pilot for Tadlock's train, but he is rejected for Dick Summers. Nevertheless, in the course of the journey Summers, like Meek, does propose a shortcut as a means of saving them 2 days of travel time. As with the Meek wagons, they soon find themselves out of water, but unlike the Meek train, they are saved when they come upon a lake that replenishes their supplies.

Meek's Cutoff (2010)

Where the title *The Way West* is generic, implying the migration path taken by thousands of settlers in the nineteenth century, the title choice of *Meek's Cutoff* indicates an emphatic particularity of one specific moment in the settlement of the American west, and an infamous moment at that. The informed audience is thereby cued to a potential tragic narrative of desperation and exhaustion, not unlike the audience for a film like *The Alamo* (1960) where the outcome is already known. While the latter narrative survives in contemporary representation because of its emphasis on the heroes who fought against Santa Anna and the Mexican army, there are no heroes being promoted in *Meek's Cutoff*.⁶

Unlike the full-blown dramatic detail of *The Way West*, *Meek's Cutoff* drastically reduces the scope of the narrative. Where the earlier film recounts a complete tale of migration from beginning to ending⁷, Reichardt has chosen to begin the film in the middle, of both conventional story (there is no true beginning...the film just starts) and actual journey (given the 2000 mile length of the Oregon Trail, it's closer to its end), with the wagons already on the shortcut. The 200 wagons have been pared down to 3; the thousand plus pioneers reduced to 3 families and only 7 people. Our expectation, following the conventions of westerns, is that these 3 families will provide a microcosm of the stock characters that populate the genre. But this is not the case in *Meek's Cutoff*. The couples seem quite homogeneous and essentially interchangeable, save for age and the narrative's eventual focus on Emily Tetherow/Michelle Williams as the chief refuter of Meek's authority. Solomon Tetherow/Will Patton is the oldest, in his late forties or early fifties; his (second) wife Emily is a lot younger.⁸ The Gatelys, Thomas/Paul Dano and his wife Millie/Zoe Kazan, are the youngest of the travelers, and appear to be in their twenties. In between age-wise are the Whites, William/Neal Huff, his pregnant wife Glory/Shirley Henderson, and their young son Jimmy/Tommy Nelson. The men and boy are dressed alike, in collarless shirts, drab-coloured pants, and well-worn hats. The three women, also wear similar clothing—long light-coloured calico dresses and face-hiding poke bonnets, the latter as protection from the harsh sun and omnipresent dust thrown up by the wagons' passage. The fact that we can't see their faces clearly at first renders them anonymous, as 'figures in a composition' rather than as individuals

with whom we can identify, a strategy of distancing enhanced by the style of the introductory sequence that presents the wagon train in its entirety in long shots and dissolves.

If there is a stereotypical character in this film (next to the Cayuse Indian), it's the pilot, Stephen Meek, played by a surprisingly unrecognizable Bruce Greenwood.⁹ In his fringed buckskins, wild unkempt hair and beard, and as the sole horse rider, Meek resembles that particular type from the western, sometimes called an 'Indian Yankee', a white man who has lived among the Indians and knows not only their ways but their language, too. From Natty Bumppo to The Lone Ranger, we have accepted the type as an intermediary between the savage west and the civilized east. In *The Way West*, he is the guide, Dick Summers, also dressed in fringed buckskins, who wears his hair longer than the other white men, and notably was married to an Indian woman who died just before the story begins. But there are noticeable and glaring differences. Summers can speak the language of the Indians they encounter, unlike Meek, who is apparently missing that Indian Yankee trait. (This is in fact a major plot conceit—that Meek can't interpret what the Cayuse Indian is saying.) As well, Summers is depicted as a wise man and a trustworthy guide, rather than, like Meek, as an unreliable and incompetent fool. It might be coincidental that both actors, Robert Mitchum and Bruce Greenwood, have deep sonorous voices, but where Mitchum's is used to promote confidence and respect in his character, Greenwood's works against type. The actual words he speaks, a mix of tall tales, bombast and hyperbole, contradict the promise of reassurance that his soothing voice would otherwise ensure.

As noted above, *Meek's Cutoff* begins with the wagon train already off the beaten path of the Oregon trail and on the shortcut that Meek has suggested. For much of the film, with minimal dialogue but much incidental sound, we follow the wagon train as it journeys across the plains, fording rivers, descending steep slopes, and dumping furniture to lighten the load on the ascents. There is a lot of emphasis on the daily chores of the group, especially the women, as they gather firewood, prepare the meals, wash the laundry and hang it up to dry. While all of the same quotidian events were depicted in *The Way West*, including the focus on women's work, they were punctuated with more dramatic moments; a man drowned in the fording of a river, Indians' theft of cattle and horses during the journeying, a child's death (Mr Tadlock's only son) as the result of a runaway wagon crash, etc. While historically, each wagon train elected a captain to head it, there is no captain in this group. When there are decisions to be made, the three men confer on a seemingly equal basis, while the women do their work in the background. The power struggle central to *The Way West* between Tadlock and Evans is absent. It is not the captain but the guide Meek whose authority is questioned; and not by a man but by a woman, Mrs Tetherow. When the authority is transferred, it's not to another white man, but to an Indian.

Slowly but inexorably we are given clues that there is a problem with the route. First, quite subtly, we are shown a close-up shot of a barren tree trunk carved with the word 'Lost'.¹⁰ Soon we hear some early mumblings about Meek's reliability—it's hinted that he might be deliberately leading them astray on the assumption that he is in the pay of the British who don't want American settlers in Oregon—and then it's on to the point

where their water supplies have dwindled and they can't find any fresh source to refill their emptying barrels. When they do at last come upon a lake, their joy is short-lived as the water proves to be alkaline, and thus undrinkable.

It is at this point that two things occur; first, Mrs Tetherow begins to separate herself out (as a figure of identification) from the others because of her growing suspicion about Meek's incompetence as a guide. It is she who confronts him with the possibility that they are lost, provoking his inscrutable response: "No ma'am, we're not lost. We're just finding our way." Second is the capture of a Cayuse Indian/Rod Rondeaux by Meek, who intends to kill him, but is prevented from doing so by the others. In a real departure from most westerns, neither white man nor Indian can speak the other's language, and it's here that Meek fails them once again as mediator in a savage land. This doesn't prevent the Indian from speaking almost continually for much of his time on film; however, no-one, not Meek, the pioneers, nor, given the absence of subtitles, we the audience can figure out what he is saying.¹¹ This comprises a deliberate refusal on the part of the director to explain his actions and hence to obfuscate our reading of the narrative. At one point, Mrs Tetherow demonstrates her difference from the others by approaching the bound Cayuse and offering him food. Sometime later, while he is off by himself, scratching out what look like pictographs on the rocks¹² (Is he just passing the time doodling? or is this, as one of the pioneers implies, a means of communication to his people? Once again, we have no way to figure it out), she goes up to him and indicates that he should take off his torn moccasin, and proceeds to sew it up. However, she confounds our expectation that she does this out of kindness, i.e. rejecting the harsh treatment of the Indian by the others thus showing herself to be free of racial prejudices and thus more 'modern' in outlook, when she explains to Mrs Gately that she wants the Indian to be indebted to her so he will assist them in finding water. The generic trope of a white person being able to communicate directly with an Indian thereby establishing a special relationship is alluded to here (back to Natty Bumppo and Chingachkook, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto), as is the Hollywood trope of a (white) woman having the innate power to tame the savage breast/beast (from *Beauty and the Beast* to *King Kong*). But no special relationship develops.

Once Meek has been deposed as guide and the decision made to follow the Indian instead, the fact remains that they—and we the audience—don't know whether the Indian is taking them to water. He can't understand what they're saying. We can't understand what he's saying; we want to, she wants to, they want to. Hope drives this denial of reality; we—settlers and audience alike—want him to be a 'good' Indian, to substitute for the 'bad' mountain man who has brought them to this barren desert. However, little in the demeanor or actions of the Indian indicates that he feels sorry for the whites, or cares about their predicament. Nonetheless, he moves out in front and begins to lead, and they follow. After a while, with still no evidence of water anywhere, they stop to debate the situation, and consider that the Indian might not actually know where there's water, or that he might be intentionally misleading them. A somewhat chastened Meek enters the discussion with another inscrutable response to the question about what are they to do, to the effect that 'the script for our actions has

already been written', as if they don't have the freedom to choose a path but one has been laid down already for them (...by God? By American manifest destiny? By the genre's conventions? By the scriptwriter?). Needless to say, this is quite an extraordinary statement for a film character to be making, as it whips the viewer out of the film and into the self-consciousness of being in a theatre watching a movie. Not only does this device bring the action to a halt, but it is followed shortly thereafter by the film itself coming to a halt, just like that, with no resolution to the settlers' predicament.

Try as one might, it's difficult to overlook this abrupt ending 'in transit'; essentially, a 'non-ending'. For those critics who see the film as a parable about the present-day United States, with its irresponsible and unreliable leadership (Bush is specifically referred to here), the ending is posited as a reflection of the indeterminacy of the country's leadership and the unknowability of the country's fate. However, it seems more fruitful to me to step outside of the film's content to see it as a critique of the film's form that is firmly within modernist traditions. As with Brecht's concept of distancing and Sirk's *aporia*, the non-ending can be seen as functioning to confront its audience with their formal need for closure, their expectations that all will be neatly tied up by the film's end. As with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, we are left with a situation that isn't going to be resolved, a question that isn't going to be answered.

As an intervention into the western genre, *Meek's Cutoff* challenges the traditions of male-centred dramatic action (gun-fights, fistfights, and other forms of belligerent confrontation). There are in fact no heroes in this film, not even Mrs Tetherow. Some have claimed the film as a feminist intervention, but other than depicting women's work (and *The Way West* certainly covered the same ground 40 years earlier), and having Mrs Tetherow confront Meek, verbally and in a standoff with a gun, it's worth noting that she herself opts for another male leader. If this is a feminist version, it's a pretty mild one.¹³ Reichardt has taken what is essentially an epic tale of survival and reduced it to its most minimalistic: a small scale cast, small screen format (1:33:1), what drama there is, is presented in a matter-of-fact way, with *dogme*-like realism of lighting (firelight only at night) and sound. The actors are shown with dirt on their faces for most of the time, and the dialogue is often transmitted as mumbling. The title and credit screens consist of pieces of cloth with hand-stitched text, like old-fashioned samplers but very plain and simple, with no decoration, as if done by a young child learning the craft.

Some contemporary filmmakers, like Reichardt, choose to pare away both film form and film content, to distill the film watching experience to its essence in order to heighten the viewer's engagement. What this requires, admittedly, is a willingness on the part of the viewer to make the effort to participate, to fill in the blanks left by the filmmaker. This may be seen as analogous to the way in which a person responds to an abstract painting, where their experience of it depends on the amount of effort they are willing to make in connecting with the work, both by remaining open to unfamiliar art, and being willing to learn more if necessary to contextualize it. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, my initial response to *Meek's Cutoff* was minimal. I was perplexed by its many refusals. In order to 'see' it, I had to provide a context

for it that clarified for me what was left out of the film.

The film's negative reviews have dismissed *Meek's Cutoff* as a boring trick on the viewers. If we take Reichardt as a serious filmmaker, and everything about her indicates that she is that, then we must see her formal decisions as a conscious and conscientious practice, intended, I would add, to make us think. And maybe, at this point, that's enough.

Notes

- 1 Guthrie also wrote the novel *The Big Sky* (1947) and the screenplays for *Shane* (1951) and *The Kentuckian* (1955).
- 2 The historical information is taken from "Terrible Trail: The Meek Cutoff, 1845" by Keith Clark and Lowell Tiller. The Caxton Printers, Ltd. Caldwell, Idaho 1966.
- 3 "If anybody asks you who 'saved' Oregon, tell them that it was the women who crossed the plains to Oregon during the fourth decade. ... The task of 'saving Oregon' was not accomplished by diplomats nor politicians, nor by any school of missionaries of high or less degree, but it was the work of the women, who made it possible for the men to come and stay where the presence of both, men and women, was needed." William A. Goulder, *Reminiscences of a Pioneer* (Boise, Idaho: Timothy Regan, 1909), p. 133
- 4 While the Meek cutoff was intended to bypass the Blue Mountains in eastern Oregon, following a southwest trail rather than the northwest one, oddly enough all discussion (including the director's) about the film *Meek's Cutoff* presumes that it's set in the Cascade range in western Oregon.
- 5 This incident derives from Guthrie's novel, where the young girl, desperate for affection, practically seduces the older male, Mr Mack whose wife is (unaccountably) frigid. He realizes his error, and informs her that he made a mistake and can't continue the affair. In the novel, Mr Mack continues on with no ultimate punishment. In the film, he is the one who kills the Indian and is thus hung by Mr Tadlock. His wife eventually avenges her husband by causing Tadlock's death. The lack of moralizing over the pregnant teenager's condition (novel and film) is very unusual and very refreshing for American films in general, and the fifties in particular. Brownie accepts her as is...the text doesn't require him to forgive her for her wayward ways.
- 6 While both incidents are part of the founding narrative of the US, I would assume that the Meek Cutoff would be less familiar to Americans than the Alamo. As a Canadian, I had no foreknowledge of the implications of the title. One reviewer, a Brit, felt the need to explain to his readers that 'cut-off' was 'American' for 'shortcut'.
- 7 *The Way West* actually ends with the settlers arriving at The Dalles on the Columbia river, where they disassemble their wagons in order to travel by raft down the river to the Willamette Valley. Our last view of Lije Evans and his family is as they push off from the banks. While watching the film, it struck me as odd that it ended before they actually got to their intended destination, but in this, the film follows the novel.
- 8 His is the only name other than Meek's drawn from the historical record. The real Tetherow was an old frontiersman, captain of a 66 wagon train that opted to follow Meek off the Oregon Trail.
- 9 It's curious to note that none of the publicity stills for the film contain Greenwood as Meek, as if the character is intended to be kept out of sight (and out of the limelight reserved for the women.) Of the 6 stills released for TIFF, 3 contain Michelle Williams as Mrs Tetherow in close up and medium shot, 1 with and 2 without the other women; 1 is a close up of Paul Dano as Mr Gately, with Neal Huff as Mr White visible behind; 1 is of the director. There is however, a shot of Shirley Henderson standing on a stool hanging laundry, face away from the camera as she watches a solitary horseman ride off into the distance. This is the only barely visible and not recognizable sighting of Meek.
- 10 Historically, a tree limb exists with the words "1845 Lost Meeks" carved into it. (cf. plate XXIV in *Terrible Trail: the Meek Cutoff*.)
- 11 The credits at the end state that he was speaking Nez Perce. I wondered why it wasn't Cayuse, but learned thereafter that the Cayuse had disappeared as a separate tribe (and language) by 1900. Those few remaining were absorbed into the Nez Perce.
- 12 Rock-marking figures in *The Way West*, too, although here it is Brownie Evans who carves his name and Mercy's into the red rock.
- 13 There is certainly enough material in the history of the settling of the west to produce a strongly feminist reading. The women had to endure immense hardship and suffering along the way, a fact not well-described in most films that tend to romanticize the journey. See also footnote 3. There are many first-hand accounts of the voyage west written by women, and many written by survivors of the Meek Cutoff. (cf. *Terrible Trail: The Meek Cutoff* op.cit.) Guthrie's novel *The Way West*, written in 1947, continually foregrounds the role of women as equal partners and participants, and ends with an encomium to the inner fortitude of the women pioneers.

The Festival, Politics and Space

AMIGO AND ROUTE IRISH

by SCOTT FORSYTH

It was a pleasure to see new films from John Sayles and Ken Loach at this year's Festival. It was a chance to consider the distinguished careers of these tenacious left-wing directors. Their new films were not greeted with much attention or celebration; there even seemed something incongruous about their appearance amidst the hyper-commercialism of the Festival. It made me reflect on the kind of space and spectatorship that the Festival presents each year.

Foremost, in its space, for a few days, the Festival hosts the full marketing machine of modern Global Hollywood, in Toronto. It becomes a setting for a sequence of "galas"—vacuous by definition—inflating mediocre movies into premiere events. Multiplexes are filled weeks later with the lame products. The local print and electronic media devolve into full tabloid inanity, an onslaught of gushing night and day. Celebrity culture supposedly obsesses the city. Crowds of star seekers cluster pathetically outside luxury hotels. One hopes for a *Day of the Locusts* eruption.

Last year, there was an eruption. The commercial space was unexpectedly politicized by the Festival itself. A Festival spotlight celebrated Tel Aviv, introducing a selection of Israeli films with the language of tourism brochures. In the year of the vicious war on Gaza, the aggressively rightist Israeli government and the ongoing brutality of the occupation, this was obviously provocative. Toronto filmmaker John Greyson initiated a protest that was joined by hundreds of local and international filmmakers, artists, academics and activists. Feelgood Festival coverage was constantly interrupted and even stars took sides; ferocious counter-attacks by Israeli lobbyists and supporters just drew more attention to the politics. What intensified the conflict was that the Spotlight on Tel Aviv fit with the Brand Israel public relations campaign that had been going on in Toronto over the previous year. Ads, billboards and shows in other elite cultural institutions had been part of an effort by the Israeli state to use propaganda and cultural diplomacy to burnish its more than tarnished international image. For example, the Royal Ontario Museum hosted the Dead Sea Scrolls, considered war plunder by the Palestinian Authority and international law; Israeli pottery was featured at the Ceramics Museum. The Israeli strategy rightly figured the slavish devotion to Israel-right-or-wrong by the Conservative federal government and solid support from the Canadian ruling class, who fill the boards of such institutions, would make Toronto a welcome test market. Festival programmers lamely defended their choice but Israeli officials gloated about the PR connection so public embarrassment continued throughout the Festival's 10 days and beyond. It was certainly the most politically exciting Festival ever. (For an excellent analysis of the Brand Israel campaign and



Amigo

the protests in Toronto, see Eric Walberg, "The Battle in Canada: Brand Israel Teflon vs. Palestinian Reality," www.counterpunch.org/walberg10192009.html).

Nothing quite so politically interesting happened in 2010. While the Hollywood apparatus did its predictable job, this Festival was really devoted to self-promotion with the opening of an attractive new Festival centre. This year's Festival space was all about architecture and real estate. Of course, cultural capital has always been connected to real estate. Here, the relationship between an exemplary neo-liberal public institution increasingly dominated by private capital, the constant reinvention of cultural consumption, and the priorities of real estate development and speculation was especially clear. The attractive new centre, in grating corporate branding, the Bell Lightbox, features theatres, galleries, restaurants, bars, a library—always a great aid to *CineAction*—and, of course, a gift shop; it is a cinephilic funhouse of high-end shopping. And it is all supported by 48 floors of condominium sales.

Indeed, that connection between real estate and elite cultural institutions has been particularly prominent in Toronto for the last 5 years. A multi-billion dollar extravaganza of building or re-building the museum, the opera, the art gallery, the conservatory, the Festival, all with celebrity architects and ruling class philanthropy/tax dodging, has re-configured local cultural consumption as a constant marketing spectacle. As often observed, the first world downtown becomes a cultural theme park. This lavish re-organization of urban space and architecture for a class-demarcated audience takes place alongside the decades-long assault on the poor and the working class that

starves wages, health care, education and social provisions in general. Class struggle in glass and concrete and art.

But the Festival has always had a bipolar organization of space. It functions perfectly as the proscenium for all the stars, fans, red carpets and buzz the publicity machine needs but it also provides the space for the crowds of film buffs, in gregarious line-ups, happily parading downtown streets, filling cinemas to see the latest challenging art film from Argentina or a gory slasher from Thailand. It is a genuinely popular event and those crowds thronged the new centre's opening. The Festival embraces both Adorno's nightmare of industrialized culture and Benjamin's imagining of a kernel of democratic potential. The new centre will expand the Festival's year-round Cinematheque for those film buff crowds as it melds it more firmly to a commercialized imperative.

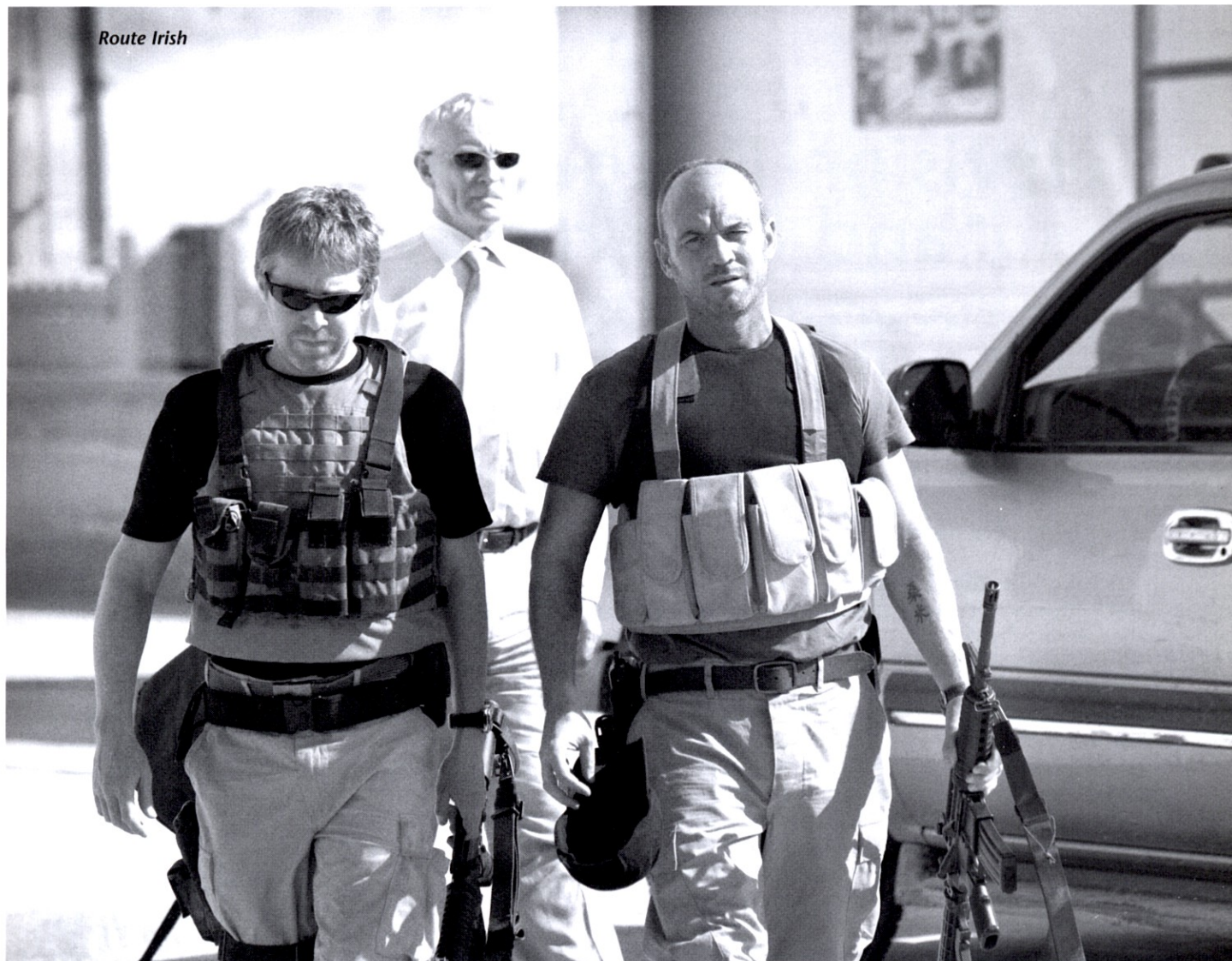
That democratic space, while hardly 'contested terrain', includes the persistent availability of all those art films, political documentaries and fledgling national cinemas that are still featured amongst the several hundred films. Chomsky always says that the media industry should encompass liberal tolerance to function hegemonically. Nonetheless, it allows us to enjoy premieres by these venerable radical filmmakers. Two films exploring historical and contemporary imperialism in a Festival dedicated to the promotion machine of Imperial Hollywood may be ironic or contradictory but Loach's and Sayles' persistence against corporate domination and marketing marginalization is still something to celebrate.

Ken Loach was one of the prominent supporters of the protest at last year's Festival and he has been active in the



international Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement that continues to grow around the world. He, along with screenwriter Paul Laverty, headlined several events with local Palestinian solidarity organizations to promote that movement and to discuss political filmmaking. His new film, *Route Irish*, is probably the most politically cogent and sweeping condemnation of the invasion and occupation of Iraq in any of the dramatic features made about that war. Those films, notoriously commercial failures, are mostly marked by weak liberal politics. (*The Hurt Locker*, a generically exciting war film, arguably anti-war in a de-politicised fashion, is the successful exception.) The film bears some comparison, among Loach's films, with *Hidden Agenda* in utilizing genre conventions – the mystery, the paranoid thriller, the war film – to express its political critique. It allows an avoidance of express didacticism though the politics is certainly not secretive. The target is the corporate privatization that is the increasing characteristic of neo-liberal imperialist war. The motivation in the plot is an ex-soldier, now mercenary, unravelling the mysterious death of his best friend on

the dangerous road to Baghdad, nicknamed Route Irish. The solidarity of brotherly mates is the emotional core that allows Loach to marry genre to the social realism of class that connects all of his work. That realist style—the work with both professional and non-professional actors, including ex-soldiers, the improvisational feel of dialogue honed to class rhythms and cadence, the keen sense of unspoken class structures—intensifies the painful excavation of the mystery. That marriage of styles is sometimes uneven as the machinations of plot become somewhat repetitive. However, the searing portrayal of atrocities and brutalization leads inexorably to a bloody climax of torture, murder, revenge and suicide, far beyond the genre conventions or the singular death that have drawn us into the plot. In the end, there is little mystery and there are no heroes to the rescue. War and imperial profiteering have thousands of victims and have made these soldiers and their corporate bosses “criminal sons of bitches on the make, that’s what we have been.” The sacrifice of men in war for profit is a difficult subject and *Route Irish* is a powerful and unsettling film.



John Sayles' *Amigo* goes back to earlier days of American imperialism. It is set during the American conquest of the old Spanish empire in 1900 with the occupation of the Philippines. Here, the USA accelerated its supplanting of the old empires of Europe, in the war that inspired Kipling to hail America shouldering "the white man's burden." The frame is historical, novelistic in its ambition to panoramically explore the social totality of one village in personal, social and political detail. All sides of the struggle, the American officers and recruits, the Spanish colonists, the indigenous villagers, including a nuanced sense of class divisions amongst them, the priests, the rebels, the would-be collaborators—are carefully dramatized in an exceptionally literate script—and largely in Tagalog, if that can be imagined in an American film! The complex relationship between conquerors and subjects is delineated with all its confusion and contradiction, even humour. The eponymous 'amigo' tries to negotiate between all sides and fails terribly. The rebels stoically face defeat, confident their resistance will someday prevail. A brutal

Colonel reminds his troops that they are winning "the hearts and minds" of these natives, while killing and imprisoning them, words that echo down the ensuing century of invasions and occupations to the present. Sayles thoughtfully presents his American warriors as much more than villainous, however. They believe in ideals of democracy and uplift, just like their British or French imperial cousins with their civilizing missions. America is certain it is the empire that is not an empire, as the Canadian economist Harold Innis put it. Perfectly plotted to a tragic and bitter ending, the film still has a radical optimism in its spirited portrayal of the complexities of imperialism's noble rhetoric and bloody results, and the corresponding inevitability of resistance.

So there is enough space in the Festival for Sayles and Loach, powerful filmmakers succeeding on their own terms despite the deafening roar of the industry. As long as the condos keep selling, the Festival space will expand in its new centre and still, in its contradictory way, include the political in the world of cinema that it offers.

Television Discourse and Governmentality

CONSIDERING *DA VINCI'S INQUEST*
AND *DA VINCI'S CITY HALL*
AS CITIZEN PROJECTS

by MICHAEL THORN

INTRODUCTION: The *Da Vinci* Series, Governmentality, and Political Economy

The episode begins with a blurry shot of we do not know what. The shot slowly sharpens to reveal a close up of a woman's feet in high heel platform shoes. It is nighttime and she walks on a glistening wet street, suggesting she might be a prostitute. We hear a car pull up and we watch as she climbs in and is driven away. The shot rack-focuses from close up to long shot to reveal another sex-trade worker further down the road. Although the shot is in colour, the setting, dark atmosphere, and high contrast cinematography all evoke a strong feeling of *film noir*: we are on the wrong side of the tracks, in seedy territory, immersed in urban decadence. We almost expect to cut to a private eye, to Sam Spade or Mike Hammer on a stake out; or to a sexy but deceitful femme fatale running away from her crime. But instead we cut to the back seat of a limousine where two men debate the merits of a red-light district in Vancouver, Canada. This is no *film noir*. This is episode three of the first season of *Da Vinci's City Hall*, entitled "Isn't Very Pretty But You Can Smoke It" (November 6, 2005), and the men in the limo are newly elected mayor Dominic Da Vinci and his assistant Sam Berger. As the scene continues, the two men pull over to the side of the road and exit the limo to meet Paula, the head of the Prostitutes' Association. Mayor Da Vinci then explains to his sceptical companions exactly how he imagines his red-light district will work, how it will be regulated, and how he expects the city police to play a helpful role in his plan—whether they like it or not. In less than five minutes we have shifted from the expectations established by a certain filmic style to something entirely different: governmentality and biopolitics. But this is nothing new for the *Da Vinci* series.

The *Da Vinci* series began in 1998 as *Da Vinci's Inquest* on Canada's public broadcaster, the CBC, and was produced by the private production company Haddock Entertainment. It aired for seven seasons as *Da Vinci's Inquest*, for one season as *Da Vinci's City Hall*, and officially ended on June 14, 2008 as a CBC made-for-television movie called *The Quality of Life*. In



Mayor Da Vinci

2002, when the show began its fifth season, it was broadcast in 45 countries worldwide.¹ Until recently repeats aired in Canada on the specialty channel Showcase and currently the first three seasons are available on DVD through Acorn Media. Along with the *Degrassi* series, the *Da Vinci* series is one of Canada's most successful television productions; and like the *Degrassi* series its success seems the result of a direct engagement with real matters of public concern—an engagement so direct that key consultant to the show, Larry Campbell (the inspiration for the *Da Vinci* character), used the show to run for mayor of Vancouver in 2002 and as mayor initiated controversial harm-reduction policies promoted within the discourse of the show.²

This analysis will use a Foucauldian governmental approach that borrows from political economy. A governmental approach is a context-specific approach that analyzes cultural institutions, products, and discourses in terms of tactics and strategies of influence and control where power and knowledge work together to regulate, manage, problematize, and maintain and/or change behaviour and thought.³ This approach assumes that “discourses structure action, belief and conduct”⁴ and it has been applied to both film and television.⁵ It also assumes that discourses compete with each other as “wills to knowledge” and “wills to power” in what Foucault calls “truth games.”⁶ Understood in this way, discourse is both more and less than ideological. That is, this approach understands that tactics and strategies can be resisted, rejected, and contested both by those addressed and by others seeking to address the same audience. As Foucault says, “[t]he power relationship and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot... be separated.”⁷ However, this approach also understands that the types and forms of knowledge and power used to underlie the “truth” of any particular discourse will still have an impact on that text’s ability to maintain, control, or change thought. A governmental analysis of discourse in film, television, and new media, then, is not so much concerned with how the spectator is hailed to accept as true, uncritically, a certain ideology, or, alternatively, how a certain discourse can be deconstructed to reveal its inherent contradictions, or even how a multiplicity of spectator positions can frame a text in different ways; rather, this approach is concerned with the methods, practices, and knowledges used to try to persuade spectators to accept as valid particular perspectives—perspectives seeking to maintain, control, or change enough thought about an issue or problem so as to have an impact on that problem. As such, this approach should also work to uncover the political, economic, and institutional influences reinforcing these discursive tactics and strategies. This is why the discipline of political economy is perfectly suited to dovetail with a governmental analysis. According to Vincent Mosco, political economy is the study of “the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources.”⁸ How discourses, especially media discourses, are constituted politically and economically prior to and during distribution and consumption have definite effects on their governmental influence. For Mosco, the key entry point for political economy is the process of commodification, but this process must also be understood in relation to processes of spatialization and structuration.⁹ While this paper does refer to the profit-driven commercialization of Canadian television, a process of commodification, and also to

the relationship between the regional politics of Vancouver and the national politics of Canada, a specialized relationship, the political economic emphasis in this paper will be on how the discourse of the *Da Vinci* series participates in structuring and promoting certain kinds of social relations, particularly power relations; in this case, as they pertain to the relationship between certain governmental institutions (the police and coroner’s office) and certain vulnerable populations in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (drug users and sex-trade workers). Of course, for Foucault, technologies of power intersect with technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, and technologies of the self.¹⁰ As such, the Foucauldian emphasis here will be on how the narrative sign system of the show is constituted with the power to influence and change thought and action (or the self) on the issue of harm-reduction through productive influences. In other words, this paper will use as its entry point that intersection where the show’s explicit textual meaning meets both its socio-political context and (some of) the creative elements of its production. I am using this as my entry point to highlight the show’s obvious political agenda, which seems to operate above and beyond any desire of the show’s producers to generate profit.

PART I: Television as Government, the CBC, and Broadcasting in Canada

To understand how the *Da Vinci* series sought to influence public policy and change thought we must first understand how television discourse operates governmentally, both in Canada and in general. In their study of American reality television, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay place television in “an analytic of government” that emphasizes television as “a cultural technology that, working outside ‘public powers,’ governmentalizes by presenting individuals and populations as objects of assessment and intervention, and by soliciting their participation in the cultivation of particular habits, ethics, behaviours, and skills.”¹¹ Ouellette and Hay cite the work of Foucauldian scholar Nikolas Rose¹² in their explanation of how television governmentalizes. They explain that Rose’s work is “useful for situating television within a larger history of social and cultural technologies that have been called upon to create citizens ‘who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves.’”¹³ Of course, their study focuses entirely on American reality television. As already noted, The *Da Vinci* series is a narrative co-production between Haddock Entertainment and Canada’s public broadcaster, the CBC. As such, the discourse in the *Da Vinci* series does not work outside public powers, nor is it specifically concerned with creating citizens who can govern themselves. Rather, the *Da Vinci* series is concerned, at least in part, with changing citizens’ thoughts on how state government should approach certain issues, issues such as drug addiction and the sex trade. The idea of television as a public instrument for creating citizens, whether in action or in thought, is also explored in a collection of work on Canadian television edited by Zoe Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos.¹⁴ They define Canadian television as a “citizen project”, one similar to the public initiatives “epitomized in the mandates of the CBC and NFB [National Film Board],” but they note in recent years these initiatives have been “challenged by the private sector’s market populism and by neo-liberal arguments against public sector

Coroner Da Vinci



spending.”¹⁵ They describe the second part of their book, “Making Citizens,” as adopting a Foucauldian perspective. Quoting Foucauldian scholar Tony Bennett¹⁶ they describe television “as policy” and as being “inescapably normative... bringing about a reformation of habits, beliefs, values—in short, ways of life.”¹⁷ In other words, both in its private neo-liberalist capacity, and in its public nation-building capacity, television operates as a form of government. However, this is not to say that it operates fluidly or without contradiction. Nor is it to suggest television’s governmental capacity can be reduced to anything so simple as “media effects.” Rather, it suggests that television is one of many media forms that serve to frame and delineate, as well as to produce and maintain, possibilities of thought and behaviour, including forms of resistance. Furthermore, it is to suggest that television operates within a matrix of mutually constituted power relations.

In her study of Canadian regional television Sera Tinic situates the development of *Da Vinci’s Inquest* within a larger problematic of power relations inherent to the CBC.¹⁸ She uses Foucault’s account of how an administration and politics of knowledge can lead to regional and territorial forms of domination to show that “the CBC maintains a geography of power whereby access to, and information about, the development process is concentrated at the centre and withheld from the periphery.”¹⁹ These power relations are further complicated by an “often unwieldy process of cultural negotiation and... conflicting goals among independent producers, regional managers, and Toronto network executives as they attempt to develop drama that represents life in the region[s] to national audiences.”²⁰ The history of the CBC and its role as Canada’s national broadcaster is too multifaceted to explain in detail here. However, it is important to know that the CBC was originally intended as Canada’s only national broadcaster, that production was supposed to be situated in the provinces and the regions, and that its mandate was conceived within an environment of anxiety and fear surrounding national unity and American cultural imperialism.²¹ In spite of this, today the CBC is but one of many broadcasters in an industry dominated by private enterprise and centralized production, and reliant on revenues derived largely from advertising and the purchase of inexpensive American programming.²² Within this highly competitive market, the CBC exists on a public/private funding formula comprised of a yearly parliamentary grant (one that is traditionally decreased rather than increased every year) combined with approximately 30% commercial revenue.²³ In other words, the geography of power that operates at the CBC is one that operates within a larger political economy of power controlled by a private industry that tends to dominate and eclipse the CBC in spite of its government mandated purpose. However, because the CBC explicitly serves a socio-political purpose and does not have as its goal the pursuit of profit, it still sometimes attracts more inventive private production companies who are interested in taking certain narrative risks.²⁴

In this light Tinic’s description of how *Da Vinci’s Inquest* came to be chosen as the CBC’s flagship west coast drama is important, even if her analysis is short-sighted. While she is correct that of the five Vancouver pitches the CBC had to choose from *Da Vinci Inquest* appeared the more generic choice,²⁵ she fails to consider the actual discourse of the show. Of course, she is

also correct that the show’s pitch fit into “the corporation’s view of ‘the business, the materials and the times’—namely, that the urban-crime drama held high audience possibilities both domestically and internationally.”²⁶ However, Tinic describes the show as “a 1990s version of *Quincy* merged with Britain’s *Cracker*, [that] reinforced the enduring sentiment that Toronto’s definition of regional production was primarily concerned with setting rather than socio-cultural specificity.”²⁷ Yet, as Glen Lowry points out (and as this essay will further demonstrate), the show’s socio-cultural specificity is actually quite strong:

Entering Vancouver as social space at a particular historical juncture, *Da Vinci’s Inquest* was both local and timely despite the obvious generic antecedents (*Wojek*, *Quincy*, *Cracker*, etc.) it brought to bear, and this made the series interesting for audiences in Vancouver and in other parts of the nation or across the globe.²⁸

In Tinic’s defence, the show was only in its first season when she wrote her analysis. But she still fails to recognize that the controversial and regionally specific issue of Vancouver’s missing women was addressed even in the first season (see below). Nevertheless, what Tinic draws attention to here is the difficulty faced by producers in developing programs outside the market paradigm, even programs developed in Canada by the CBC for the public good. Thus, the Corporation’s view of the business of television and its centralized organization of power are actually tactics and strategies of control developed to negotiate the commercialized environment within which it has no choice but to operate. That the creators and producers of the *Da Vinci* series were able to negotiate around these tactics and strategies for nearly eight seasons is testimony to the power their discourse has had in influencing public policy on a number of issues. However, it is also testimony to the fact that their discourse tends to reinforce centralized forms of government.

PART II: The *Da Vinci* Discourse on Harm-reduction and Poverty as Biopolitics

The scene from *Da Vinci’s City Hall* described at the beginning of this article harkens back to the second season of *Da Vinci’s Inquest*. In that season’s two-part finale, “Fantasy” and “Reality” (January 12 and 19, 2000), then city coroner Dominic Da Vinci debates city councillor Jack Pierce on a radio talk show. They heatedly discuss the role of television as an influence on violence in society and they discuss the merits of a red-light district as a response to the issue of Vancouver’s missing women. This debate is inter-cut with a storyline, also shot in a style evoking *film noir*, of a man picking up a sex-trade worker intending to murder her. As the police arrest this man, back on the radio show Pierce sarcastically suggests that next Da Vinci will want a hooker’s union with hazard pay. Da Vinci responds, “That’s the best idea I’ve heard from you all day.” In reality, at the time these episodes aired, Vancouver really was facing a crisis involving more than 50 missing women, although Robert Picton had not yet been arrested, nor had the bodies buried on his pig farm been discovered.²⁹ So, considering police in Vancouver did not actively begin investigating these murders until August

2001³⁰—a year and a half after the airings of “Fantasy” and “Reality”—and considering the numerous other references made to Vancouver’s missing women in the first three seasons of the show,³¹ it would seem that *Da Vinci’s Inquest*, by drawing national attention to this issue, may have actually participated in encouraging the police to begin their investigation. In any case, by 2005, when *Da Vinci’s City Hall* was demonstrating exactly how a red-light district might operate, Robert Picton had been arrested and was facing trial for multiple homicides, and Larry Campbell (former mayor of Vancouver, former consultant to the show, the inspiration for the character of Da Vinci, co-writer of the second season episodes cited above, former chief coroner of British Columbia, former regional coroner of Vancouver, and former RCMP officer) had just been appointed to the Canadian Senate to protect his recently established safe-injection site.³²

A safe-injection site as a response to the growing drug problem in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is also an issue explored in *Da Vinci’s Inquest*. In the sixth season (2003–2004), coroner Da Vinci convinces then Mayor Russ Hathaway to establish one. The airing of this season coincided with Mayor Campbell’s real-life three-year struggle to open his own safe-injection site, despite massive opposition.³³ Red-light districts and safe-injection sites as policy initiatives designed to deal with problems surrounding prostitution and drug addiction fall under a general initiative called harm-reduction. In its simplest form harm-reduction is a strategy that addresses and reduces “the health, social and economic harms associated with substance use and addictions”³⁴ by focusing on public health rather than prohibition.³⁵ It took Campbell his entire term as mayor to establish Canada’s first (and only) safe-injection site, but because he did not seek a second term he never had the opportunity to begin discussions on a red-light district.³⁶ Campbell’s difficulty in enacting his plans were a result of harm-reduction being “at odds with the prevailing framework of international drug control, a framework which rests on law enforcement and the criminalization of behaviours related to illicit drug use;”³⁷ this in spite of the proven benefits of harm-reduction initiatives such as needle exchange programs (also covered in the discourse of the *Da Vinci* series) and safe-injection sites.³⁸ In fact, in keeping with this prevailing framework, Canada’s Conservative government has been working to shut down Vancouver’s safe-injection site,³⁹ this in spite of their own study that supports expanding such facilities.⁴⁰ Considering this, the discourse of the *Da Vinci* series was not just “influential,” it did not just represent an “ideological” point of view—it had a governmental reality that actively inserted itself into Canadian policy debate; and it has the potential to continue to do so today through DVD sales and repeated airings of the show. In fact, were Showcase and the CBC to resume airing the show in syndication now it could influence debate in Ontario, where the recent decision to strike down prostitution laws is currently being appealed by the federal and provincial governments.⁴¹ However, the governmental power of the show does not just reside in its ability to influence public policy—it also resides in its ability to represent governmentality itself.

In *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault defines governmentality in terms of the administrative state that emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and traces how it came to oper-

ate in modern liberal democracies. He describes governmentality as “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge,⁴² and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.”⁴³ Of course, he includes, as part of governmentality’s regulatory form, discipline and biopolitics.⁴⁴ A seventh season episode of *Da Vinci* entitled “Before They Twist The Knife” (January 23, 2005) demonstrates just how discipline and biopolitics can operate together, even when in conflict and even when lodged between neo-liberal ideology and the needs of the welfare state. In this episode, a confrontation between a drug addict and a police officer outside Da Vinci’s safe-injection site ends with both dead and creates a public relations crisis for Da Vinci. The first half of the episode sets the stage for a *Law and Order* style mystery where it is implied, via contradictory witness testimony, that the police may have violated a non-harassment policy outside the site. As such, a dramatic conflict between the police chief (discipline) and the coroner’s office (biopolitics) seems inevitable. However, midway through the episode all narrative expectations are turned upside down as Da Vinci inexplicably ignores these contradictions. He concludes, “maybe the response from the Vancouver members was less than perfect, [but] I think that maybe they’ll come up clean in this one.” Immediately after offering this assessment, the strategy underlying his conclusion becomes clear: with the resignation of Mayor Hathaway imminent, Da Vinci plans to run for mayor himself. Rather than risk a high profile confrontation between two lower levels of government, Da Vinci decides to protect his safe-injection site by sacrificing the “truth” of a double homicide so as to strike out for a higher office. A number of things are important here. First, a governmental conflict between discipline and regulation is expressed here in terms of interpersonal tactics and strategies rather than as an external public debate. However, this actually pointed to the real public debate that was occurring in Vancouver at that time.⁴⁵ Second, by emphasizing Da Vinci as *the* individual capable of negotiating these disciplinary and biopolitical conflicts, an implicit assumption of neo-liberalism, individualism, is invoked in a welfare state context. That is, it is not the State, or any particular governmental organization that steps in to solve this problem. Rather it is these organizations that constitute the problem, and it requires the individual autonomy of Da Vinci to smooth over the contradictions and make these governmental organizations work harmoniously. However, this does not extend as far as the individualized self-government Oullette and Hay argue is encouraged by reality television. Rather, here Da Vinci plays a pastoral role.⁴⁶ That is, he situates himself as the one individual capable of governing his flock of Downtown Eastside drug users, sex-trade workers, and sympathetic police officers, a flock that is apparently incapable of governing themselves without his help. Finally, the airing of this episode coincided with Larry Campbell’s last year as mayor and thus (as politically cynical as it may be) the episode serves to legitimate Campbell’s real-life struggle to establish his own safe-injection site, just as the show three years earlier served to politically legitimate his real-life run for mayor. As such, and as controversial as the *Da Vinci* series may be, it nevertheless maintains the governmental systems it

criticizes. In doing so, however, it privileges government as public initiative while still buying into certain key anti-State neo-liberal assumptions. Having said this, harm-reduction is not the only issue explored in the *Da Vinci* series; there are clearly other representations at play here beyond the show's explicit intended discourse.

For example, in Kim Elliott's examination of discourses of poverty in the show, she emphasizes those story lines that "depict real issues and struggles" in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and notes the show's "clear sensitivity to issues of representation" but maintains that it still sensationalizes and distorts the reality of Canadian poverty.⁴⁷ She writes, "[i]n its attempt to accurately represent the area while avoiding certain kinds of stereotyping, *Da Vinci's Inquest* tends to over-represent this space as white and young" and it "involves a criminalization of poverty through a focus on deviance in its portrayal of prostitution, drug abuse and homelessness—the images that

'sell.'"⁴⁸ Elliott, who defines discourse as the "lens through which people construct reality," explains that one of the ways discourse circulates is through media representations.⁴⁹ Elliott is working within an established tradition here. Television discourse is often treated as representational and ideological.⁵⁰ However, to do a governmental study of discourse is to treat it as more; it is to treat it as a complex social function, as a tactic that intervenes, both directly and indirectly, in decisions surrounding social relations and the distribution of resources. It is to treat both the technology of the discourse and the discourse itself as a strategy invested with power relations.

Of course, Elliott's analysis does not lack importance for not exploring governmentality in this specific way. Her discussion of the relationship between poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and its representation in *Da Vinci's Inquest* is both insightful and useful. She is quite correct in saying the poverty represented in *Da Vinci* uses images that "sell." My earlier



Man arrested for murder of missing women guides *Da Vinci* and police to forest graveyard

description of how *Da Vinci's City Hall* uses the entertainment value of a *film noir* style to introduce a serious discussion on the merits of a red-light district illustrates this point. Furthermore, Elliott links the problematics of the political power underlying harm-reduction to the problematics of the discursive power underlying representation. As such, I do not see my work as improving on Elliott's. Rather, I see it as working alongside it, opening up a different space in which to explore how the discourse in the series operates. And Elliott is certainly not blind to my concern. She acknowledges, even if she does not pursue this line of reasoning, that the show does "in fact seek to insert itself into public social policy debates."⁵¹ What I will show next is how the show did this through the material "knowledge" of Larry Campbell.

PART III: Larry Campbell, Dominic Da Vinci, and Governmental Roles

When *Da Vinci's Inquest* was first developed Campbell was the chief coroner of British Columbia and friend to Chris Haddock, creator of the show.⁵² As such, Campbell was quickly brought on as a consultant; however, as the project progressed he shifted from being just a consultant to being the real-life basis for the character of Da Vinci.⁵³ With Campbell's ties to the show strengthened he soon became a regular on set, consulting on scripts and technical procedures. Part of his influence was to ensure (contrary to the usual hyperbolic tendency in television to exaggerate medical and scientific procedures for the purpose of entertainment) that the procedures followed in the *Da Vinci* series would be as accurate as possible. As Alexandra Gill explains, "Campbell realized he was being offered a rare opportunity to help take the oft-misunderstood coroner's job out from the shadows between the police department and the medical profession and show the public how it really does function as an investigative advocate for the dead."⁵⁴ The effect of this was to enhance a certain kind of realism in the show, but it was also to enhance the political value of the show's discourse. Campbell's lived knowledge as a real coroner infused the show with that knowledge, even if it was mediated through the entertainment of narrative. This is not to suggest that Campbell himself originated the discourse—far from it. But it is still important to consider the impact Campbell had on the show; and this impact is connected to the roles Campbell occupied in real life, the same roles Da Vinci occupied in the fiction of the show. These roles include RCMP officer, city coroner, and mayor.⁵⁵

RCMP officer, city coroner, and mayor are all roles associated with state apparatuses that deal with mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power connected to discipline and biopolitics. Foucault discusses the relationship between discipline and biopolitics in *Society Must Be Defended* where he distinguishes sharply between technologies of discipline, which developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and are applied to individual bodies, and technologies of biopolitics, which developed at the end of the eighteenth century and are applied "to man-as-living-being."⁵⁶ He explains that biopolitics "is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form... a global mass that is affected by over-all processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on."⁵⁷ He notes, this technology of biopower "does not

exclude disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it, modify it to some extent, and above all, uses it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques."⁵⁸ In other words, while technologies of discipline and biopower are certainly different, they are not necessarily separate. As already discussed, this dovetailed relationship is especially noticeable in the discourse of the *Da Vinci* series. The fact that both Campbell "in reality" and Da Vinci "in fiction" embody careers that straddle and manifest both of these technologies is one of the elements that makes the discourse in this series particularly important as a governmental tactic.

In a first season *Inquest* episode entitled "Gabriel" (November 25, 1998) Da Vinci investigates the murder of an underage teenage boy beaten to death for working as an RCMP informant. During an off-the-record interrogation of the officer for whom the boy worked, Da Vinci's invokes his own past in the RCMP as he chastises the man for having abused his position of trust by needlessly placing the boy's life in danger. In a standard shot-reverse-shot conversation set during a casual stroll, the man justifies his tactics as being part of the rules of the game: "I busted him. He rolled over to get a better deal. Those are the rules of engagement." Da Vinci replies, "Well, maybe it's time those rules got rewritten." Here, Da Vinci applies his biopolitical role as coroner to his former disciplinary role as narcotics officer. Now more concerned with the prevention of future deaths than with the arrest of current drug offenders, now more concerned with the general health of child informants than with the need to punish and imprison those who circumvent the drug laws, he decides to push for a change in police procedures so as to protect future informants from unnecessary harm. As such, he uses his power as city coroner to threaten the police with a public inquest. And yet he still respects the police position. He does not "roll" the officer "over" or compromise the officer's cases. Rather, he rebukes him in private, and later addresses his political concerns to the police administration. Even the way the scene is shot—in a comfortable, visually non-confrontational over-the-shoulder shot-reverse-shot conversation—this suggests Da Vinci's complicity. Here biopower and discipline are certainly not in opposition; they work hand-in-hand to normalize and regulate from opposite directions. And, as already discussed, when Da Vinci's position as coroner no longer provides him the influence he needs to instigate the policy changes he desires, rather than give up, or take his fight to the streets in radical revolutionary protest, he moves his way up the ladder of power to the mayor's office. If he cannot establish his harm-reduction policies in his governmental role as coroner, then he will do so in his governmental role as mayor, where he is given political influence over both the city police and the coroner's office, over both discipline and biopower.

However, Dominic Da Vinci "the man" is not the important figure here, and neither is Larry Campbell. The important figures are RCMP officer, coroner, and mayor. The "knowledge" of procedure, the "knowledge" of regulation, the "knowledge" behind the information, and the "knowledge" behind the political "truth" that emerges in this discourse are all contingent on the "knowledge" acquired through the experience of living these roles. The reason we trust the discourse of the *Da Vinci* series as being authentic, even if some may not agree with it as



Da Vinci and police investigate double homicide outside his safe-injection site

actual policy, is because we trust the sources of knowledge from which it comes. Larry Campbell RCMP officer, Larry Campbell city coroner, Larry Campbell mayor, and even after the fact, Larry Campbell senator, all serve (along side his roles as co-writer and consultant to the show) to legitimate the knowledgeable truth of the discourse the show engages in. Even if our personal knowledge of the RCMP, B.C. Coroner's Office, and Office of the Mayor of Vancouver is limited, even if we do not know who Larry Campbell is, the "realistic" portrayal of these roles in the show cannot help but work its way through the discourse in a manner that will impact us as citizens. However, for many people, especially in Vancouver, Campbell's association with the show was very public. His mayoral campaign slogan was "Mayor Da Vinci"⁵⁹ and even his senate biography refers to the show:

[H]e became the inspiration behind the popular CBC drama *Da Vinci's Inquest*, as well as its spin-off, *Da Vinci's City Hall*. Larry Campbell was intimately involved with the television programs, writing and collaborating on scripts for the series.⁶⁰

In other words, as much as Campbell's career legitimizes the discourse of the series, the series also legitimates Campbell's political career, and both legitimize the system within which the show and Larry Campbell operate. Lowry confirms much of what I have been saying:

Da Vinci's Inquest focused on the work of City Coroner Dominic Da Vinci, a hard-living, hard edged, mumbling but socially progressive every-

man modelled on real-life senator Larry Campbell, the former Vancouver mayor and ex-city coroner. With Larry Campbell's expert assistance as a consultant and writer, *Da Vinci's Inquest* was able to bring this mainstay of genre TV to life for prime-time audiences. In so doing, this series became a confluence of real-life social issues and the emergence of an unfolding political drama.⁶¹

In this sense the *Da Vinci* series may seem an anomaly. The direct relationship between the discourse of the show and the socio-political reality of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside operates in part through an active politician—but this is not usual for television narrative. One could argue that the ability of the show to have the influence it did necessarily required Larry Campbell's involvement. However, one could also argue that the impact Larry Campbell has had as a politician required the discourse of the show; there is no way to know whether Campbell's bid for mayor would have been successful without it. Besides, as I have already demonstrated, the *Da Vinci* series sought to insert itself into policy debates long before Campbell

used the show to run for mayor—and even before his ties to the show became public knowledge. What is interesting here, then, are the multifaceted reciprocal relationships tying the show, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, and Canadian politics all together into one picture.

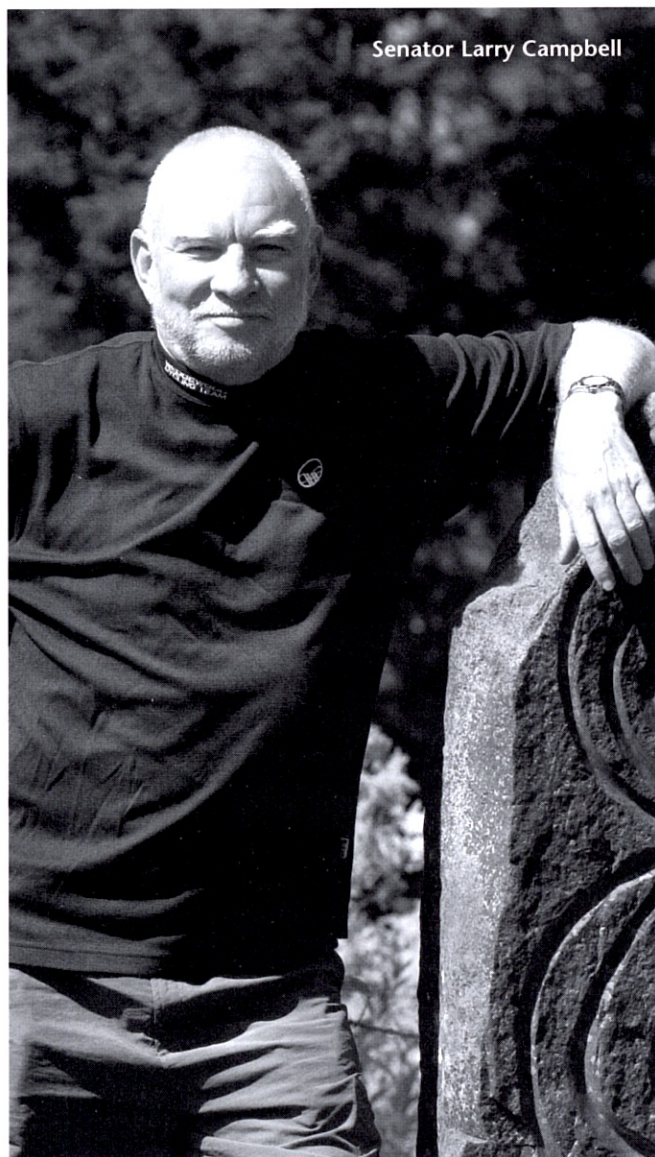
CONCLUSION: The *Da Vinci* Series, Governmentality, and Future Research

My analysis of the *Da Vinci* series emphasizes the governmental roles of Larry Campbell as they operate through the governmental role of public television in Canada. However, this is not a complete account of governmentality and the *Da Vinci* series. Lowry, for example, reminds us that *Da Vinci's City Hall* was one of several popular shows cancelled following the 2005 CBC lockout.⁶² He does not discuss this in depth, but a more detailed account of the political and economic conflicts operating within the CBC at that time would be an important contribution to this analysis. Also, Elliott concludes her analysis of 'discourses of poverty' in the series by discussing the impact of the show's production practices on the lived reality of the Downtown Eastside. Her paper points to the importance of considering Haddock Entertainment's role as a private institution that participated not only in governing the discourse of the show, but also in governing (however temporarily) the lives of the people living in the locations where the show was shot. As such, a more complete analysis of the *Da Vinci* series would need to address more thoroughly the creative role and production practices of this company and its employees. Elliott's paper further points to the importance of considering the subjective positions of the drug users and sex-trade workers represented in the show. This is also an area where future research could prove fruitful. Of course, by only addressing this one series, my analysis only considers television as a governmental form in a very limited way. Yet, when placed alongside the work of Ouellette and Hay and Druick and Kotsopoulos, it contributes to a picture of the multiplicity of ways that television *can* operate as what Foucault calls the "conduct of conduct"⁶³ and the "government of self and others."⁶⁴ But we must remember, for Foucault governmentality does not just operate as a technology of power; it also operates as a technology of the self. Future research on governmentality and media studies will need to address this aspect of discourse more thoroughly.

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NOTES

- 1 Glen Lowry, "Da Vinci's Inquest: Postmortem," in *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television*, eds. Zoe Druick & Aspa Kotsopoulos (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 247; and Alexandra Gill, "Dissecting Da Vinci," *The Globe and Mail*, November 9, 2002, 13.
- 2 Lowry, 250.
- 3 Governmentality as an approach is rooted in a lecture Foucault delivered at the College de France on February 1, 1978, published as part of *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 87-114. This lecture is also published as part of *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104. As well as drawing on a variety of other works by Foucault, this approach also draws specifically on the essay "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion



Senator Larry Campbell

- (New York: The New York Press, 2000), 326-348, originally published as an appendix to *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208-226.
- 4 Eamonn Carrabine, "Discourse, governmentality and translation," *Theoretical Criminology* 4.3 (2000): 311.
 - 5 See Lee Grieveson, "On Governmentality and Screens," *Screen* 50.1 (2009): 180-187; Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds, *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); and Zoe Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos, "Introduction," *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television*, eds. Zoe Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2008), 1-14.
 - 6 Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 218-19; and "Technologies of the Self," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New York Press, 1997), 224. (I am deliberately combining sources from two different periods in Foucault's career here to highlight a continuity in his thought not often acknowledged.)
 - 7 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, 342.
 - 8 Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, Second Edition (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 2.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 11-18, 128-210.
 - 10 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 224-5; Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 338.
 - 11 Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, 12-13.
 - 12 Nikolas Rose has written a number of works influenced by Foucault, including *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and (with Peter Miller) *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008); however, here Ouellette and Hay cite "Governing 'Advanced' Democracies," in *Foucault and Political Reason*, eds. A. Barry, T. Osborne, and N. Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37-64.
 - 13 Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living*, 13, citing Rose, "Governing," 45.
 - 14 Zoe Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos, eds., *Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2008).
 - 15 Druick and Kotsopoulos, "Introduction," *Programming Reality*, 5.
 - 16 Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum: History, theory, politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995) is a groundbreaking study that analyzes museums as governmental institutions; however, here Druick and Kotsopoulos cite *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (London: Sage, 1995). Bennett is also cited by Ouellette and Hay.
 - 17 Druick and Kotsopoulos, "Introduction," 9, citing Bennett, 91.
 - 18 Sera Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 75-93.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 79, citing Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews: 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 69.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, 75.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 61-66; Bart Beaty and Rebecca Sullivan, *Canadian Television Today* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006) 29-31, 60-65; and Marc Raboy, "Canada: The Hybridization of Public Broadcasting," in *Public Broadcasting for the 21st Century*, ed. Mark Raboy (Luton: John Libbey Media, 1995), 103-107.
 - 22 Tinic, 65-66; Beaty and Sullivan, 67-78, 108-114.
 - 23 Tinic, 65-66; Beaty and Sullivan, 27, 86, 94-95; and Raboy, 113-117.
 - 24 Tinic, 83.
 - 25 *Ibid.*, 91.
 - 26 *Ibid.*, 91-92.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 91.
 - 28 Lowry, "Da Vinci's Inquest: Postmortem," 250.
 - 29 CBC News, "In depth: Robert William Picton and the missing women of Vancouver," *CBC Online News*, January 19, 2007, accessed May 10, 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/pickton/history.html>.
 - 30 *Ibid.*; and Lindsay Kines and Les Leyne, Postmedia News, "Serial killer evidence ignored, 13 more women went missing," *VancouverSun.com*, August 20, 2010, accessed October 10, 2010, <http://www.vancouverSun.com/news/Serial+killer+evidence+ignored+more+women+went+missing/3420888/story.html>.
 - 31 For example, the first season three-part premier "Little Sister" (October 7, 14, and 21, 1998) and the second season two-part premier "A Cinderella Story" (October 6 and 13, 1999) both address the issue of Vancouver's missing women.
 - 32 Lowry, "Da Vinci's Inquest," 250; and CTV News Staff, "Vancouver mayor plays down crystal meth threat," *CTV.ca* October 16, 2005, accessed 10 May 2010, http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20051015/campbell_meth_051015/20051015?hub=TopStories.
 - 33 Jane Armstrong, "Crusading mayor aims to change Vancouver," *The Globe and Mail*, November 18, 2002, A3; Terry O'Neill, "No Quick Fix: A plan to establish a safe-injection site bedevils Vancouver's new mayor," *The Report Newsmagazine (National Edition)*, December 16, 2002, 24-26; and Allan Woods, Ian Bailey and Fiona Anderson, "Drug crackdown may cut safe-injection site funds," *CanWest News Service*, December 5, 2005, accessed June 1, 2009, http://www2.canada.com/national/features/decisioncanada/story_05.html?id=135e9983-3c42-42e6-83dc-e71c05150925.
 - 34 Lucille Auffrey, "Working toward accessible, equitable care," *The Canadian Nurse* 103.8 (2007): 3.
 - 35 Carla Power, Scott Johnson and Stefan Theil, "Europe Just Says Maybe: From the bloodstream to the mainstream: authorities abandon faith in prohibition and embrace 'harm reduction,'" *Newsweek International*, November 1, 1999, 20.
 - 36 Jonathan Fowlie, "Let's talk red-light district, mayor says," *Vancouver Sun*, October 31, 2005, accessed June 1, 2009, <http://www2.canada.com/vancouver/vancouverSun/news/story.html?id=377759eb-a689-4875-baa0-cc41240bbbab>.
 - 37 Canadian Medical Association, "HIV, harm reduction and human rights," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 172.5 (2005): 605.
 - 38 Richard Elliott, et al., "Reason and rights in global drug control policy," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 172.5 (2005): 655; Gilles Paradis, "Harm Reduction: Keeping the Public's Health in Sight," *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 99.6 (2008): 445; and E Wood, MW Tyndall, JS Montaner, and T Kerr, "Summary of findings from the evaluation of a pilot medically supervised safer injecting facility," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 175.11 (2006): 1399-404.
 - 39 Paradis, "Harm Reduction," 445; and Neal Hall, "Tories to ask top court to rule on Vancouver safe-injection site," *VancouverSun.com*, February 9, 2010, accessed May 10, 2010, <http://www.vancouverSun.com/news/Tories+court+rule+Vancouver+safe+injection+site/2541682/story.html>.
 - 40 Janice Tibbetts, "Study backs more safe injection sites in Canada," *NationalPost.com*, May 5, 2008, accessed May 10, 2010, <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/canada/story.html?id=494104>.
 - 41 CBC News, "Ottawa to appeal prostitution ruling," *CBC Online News*, September 29, 2010, accessed October 10, 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2010/09/29/mcguinity-prostitution.html>.
 - 42 Here Foucault means the political economy of early liberal theorists such as Adam Smith and Jean Jacques Rousseau. According to Mosco, contemporary political economy is partly a critique of early political economy's development into contemporary neoclassical economics (37-64).
 - 43 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 108.
 - 44 *Ibid.*, 108, 115-120.
 - 45 Interestingly enough, the seventh season of *Da Vinci's Inquest* ends with Da Vinci announcing his run for mayor, but the first season of *City Hall* begins after he had already been elected; so, the public debate is actually skipped within the discourse of the show.
 - 46 For a brief discussion of how ancient Christian pastoral practices were transferred into modern forms of State government, see Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 332-335. This topic is also addressed in detail in several of Foucault's published lectures.
 - 47 Kim Elliott, "'In the Bear Pit': Considering *Da Vinci's Inquest* in the Context of Representations and Discourses of Poverty in Canada," *Studies in Political Economy* 68 (2002): 19-20.
 - 48 *Ibid.*, 23-24.
 - 49 *Ibid.*, 15.
 - 50 James Friedman, "Introduction," in *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1; and Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology," in *Television: The Critical View*, 4th edition, ed. Horace Newcomb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 507-532.
 - 51 Elliott, "'In the Bear Pit,'" 19.
 - 52 Gill, "Dissecting Da Vinci," 13.
 - 53 *Ibid.*
 - 54 *Ibid.*
 - 55 *Ibid.*
 - 56 Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 242; Foucault also discusses biopolitics in Part Five of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 135-159.
 - 57 Foucault, "Society," 242-3.
 - 58 *Ibid.*, 242.
 - 59 Gill, "Dissecting Da Vinci," 13.
 - 60 Senator Larry W. Campbell 2006 Senate of Canada, "The Honourable Larry W. Campbell: Biography," *LarryCampbell.ca*, accessed June 1, 2009, <http://www.larrycampbell.ca/biography.shtml>.
 - 61 Lowry, "Da Vinci's Inquest," 250.
 - 62 *Ibid.*, 247.
 - 63 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 341.
 - 64 Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College de France 1982-1983* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Black Christmas

THE SLASHER FILM WAS **MADE IN CANADA**

by SARA CONSTANTINEAU

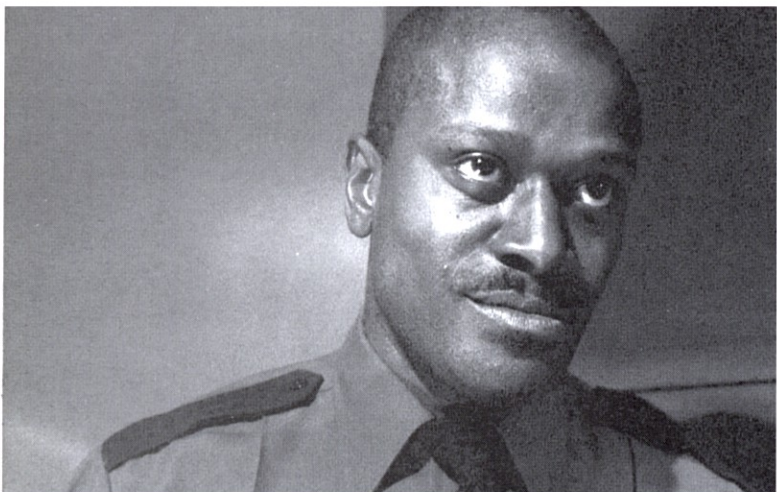
Contrary to popular belief, John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) is not the first incarnation of the modern-day slasher film. That honour belongs to the small Canadian production *Black Christmas* (1974). This relatively unknown film is responsible for a genre that informed dozens of Hollywood imitations and continues to be a popular part of contemporary cinema. *Black Christmas* is an example of how the formulaic nature of genre cinema does not necessarily restrict a filmmaker's means of political and national expression, because this film reflects a Canadian sensibility that doesn't exist in its Hollywood counterparts. That an influential cinematic genre originated with a Canadian film challenges the assumption that genre cinema opposes national cinema, and the constant exchange between cultural texts means that Canadian cinema can impact an institution as dominant as Hollywood.

Black Christmas—a low-budget Canadian horror film directed by Bob Clark—follows a group of co-eds during the days leading up to their Christmas holidays. While living in a sorority house, these women repeatedly receive threatening phone calls and are eventually murdered by a man named Billy, whose true identity is never determined. This film takes place during a holiday, foregrounds the killer's subjective point of view, and features adolescent female victims stalked by a deranged male predator—all characteristics typically associated with the slasher film¹. Subjective camerawork is prevalent; the camera is often restricted to Billy's point of view so that his body remains hidden. The film begins with an extended sequence in which a shaky camera approaches the sorority house, accompanied by Billy's heavy breathing. The camera voyeuristically peers through an open window obscured by curtains, and we see male hands reach up to climb a trellis and scale the house. We see through Billy's eyes throughout the film, especially when he is killing the girls. Another slasher trope established in this film is the Final Girl. In virtually all slasher films there is a female character who knows what is going on, resists the killer's attacks, and survives until the end of the film.² Jess is such a character in *Black Christmas*.

John Carpenter's *Halloween* was released four years after *Black Christmas*, but it is often recognized as the first slasher film³. Because it was so successful, its stylistic and narrative choices were imitated and developed by later Hollywood films. While *Halloween* did not necessarily copy *Black Christmas*, it gets the credit for starting the slasher tropes found in the earlier film. Carpenter's film also follows a group of adolescents, overwhelmingly female, who are killed by a psychotic male named Michael. It uses a subjective camera to reflect the first-person perspective of the killer, most prominently in its opening sequence that bears a striking resemblance to the opening of *Black Christmas*. *Halloween* begins with a long take from the killer's perspective, effectively concealing his identity. The camera peers in the windows of a suburban home before entering the house. Next we see a long-sleeved hand grab a knife and murder the film's first victim. *Halloween* also features a Final Girl, Laurie, who is hyper-aware, fights off the killer's repeated attacks, and survives until the end of the film.

There are significant differences between these two horror films, and even Bob Clark does not think Carpenter is guilty of plagiarism, as indicated by his interview on the 2002 DVD





release of his film. However, he does acknowledge that his film influenced Carpenter's production. In the same interview he recalls a conversation he had with Carpenter in which he described a possible sequel to *Black Christmas*; this purely hypothetical films would have taken place during Halloween of the next year, and Billy would have broken out of a mental institution to resume his stalking of the sorority house. In *Halloween*, Michael escapes from a mental institution to return to his former home and stalk those he associates with it. It is hard to believe that the fundamental parallels between the two films are just a coincidence.

Black Christmas is a Canadian production despite its use of international talent. Bob Clark was an American who worked out of Canada for many years, and Olivia Hussey, who plays the protagonist Jess, was born in Argentina. Still, Canadians had equally important roles. Most of the supporting cast was made up of Canadian actors, and the story was written by Canadian Roy Moore, who was inspired by a series of real-life murders that happened in Montreal⁴. The Canadian cinematographer, Reginald Morris, contributed to the creation of a hands-free device for carrying the camera, facilitating the iconic POV shots where we see Billy kill his victims. This film's "Canadian-ness" should not be in doubt because it was very successful with

Canadian audiences, but it did not appeal to American audiences when it was first released. One reason may be the unsuccessful marketing campaign in the US, where among other things Warner Bros. Changed the title to avoid any "blaxploitation" connotations. However, that it connected more with a Canadian audience means it reflects certain aspects of the Canadian experience.

Black Christmas has the same generic principles as the American slasher, but it does not propagate the same ideology. *Halloween* arguably punished female sexuality. No motive is ever supplied for why Michael murdered his sister at the beginning of the film, so the only available reason is that she just had sex. Laurie, the only teenager to survive this film, is also the only teen who is not sexually active. Her friends spend the film thinking about, talking about, or having sex, and they are the characters that are killed. The concept of a virginal Final Girl outlasting her more promiscuous peers is common in the American slasher films that came after *Halloween*⁵. This condemnation of female sexuality combined with the tendency for these films to exclusively and violently kill female characters leads to accusations that the slasher is inherently sexist⁶.

Although *Black Christmas* contains violence against women, any potential sexism is undermined by a prominent feminist subtext. Jess is not a virginal Final Girl. Her relationship with her boyfriend Peter receives the most onscreen attention compared to the other girls' relationships, especially since Jess is pregnant and wants to have an abortion. When she tells Peter this news he is not sympathetic, and he angrily asserts that she is being selfish. Jess is not criticized by this film for wanting an abortion, but Peter is punished for trying to force her to keep the baby; he appears irrational and controlling, and audience sympathy remains with Jess. He doesn't listen to her and he doesn't seem to care about her feelings. He forcefully proposes to Jess, simply saying: "I'm quitting the conservatory, and we're getting married." It does not occur to him to give her a choice, and she does not accept this misogynistic attitude. Jess kills Peter at the climax of the film because she believes he is the killer, but this murder also serves to eliminate an oppressive patriarchal force. There is no real evidence that he was responsible for the murders; blaming him for the girls' deaths is an excuse to rid the world of his old-fashioned, damaging values.

According to George Lipsitz, cinema comments on the social issues of its time and "[repositions] the audience in regard to dominant myths"⁷. This is one reason for the ideology makeover in the American remake of *Black Christmas* (2006). This film maintains certain aspects of the original version, including the basic premise and a sexual Final Girl, but it replaces the abortion subplot with a narrative that stresses the importance of the traditional family unit. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that Billy's mother was a horrible person who hated her son from the moment he was born. Billy is hurt by her lack of affection and is traumatized after he sees her and her lover ruthlessly kill his father. Because he knows about this murder he is locked in the attack when he is five years old. Years later his mother sexually abused him and becomes pregnant with his sister/daughter Agnes. Billy is physically isolated from the only family he knows, which is already perverted. When Billy is 21 he receives a telescope for Christmas, and he uses it to spy on a happy family opening presents, clearly yearning for



that type of bond. According to Glen Morgan, the director of the remake, Billy believes that love is expressed through violence after he sees his mother kill his father⁸. Near the end of the film we see Billy and Agnes arranging the bodies of the murdered girls around a Christmas tree decorated with human eyes; they created a twisted holiday scenario to try to have a family. Their violence towards the sorority girls is a misguided attempt to capture the Christmas spirit, and this revelation is sad and pathetic in light of their extensively explored childhood. These villains are damaged because they were denied a normal family experience. Emphasizing the importance of family directly opposes the pro-choice message of the original *Black Christmas*, reflecting a less progressive social policy to appeal to an American audience.

The original *Black Christmas* critiques traditional authority figures. Typical examples of patriarchal authority are often undermined by the women in this film. Clare's father appears at the sorority house when she fails to meet him. Far from a domineering figure, he is clueless and old-fashioned, and he is frequently the butt of Mrs. Mac's and Barb's jokes. Sergeant Nash is another patriarchal figure who provides comic relief instead of an authoritative presence. He is mocked by Barb when she tells him that the sorority's home phone number begins with

"fellatio," and he is mocked later by his colleagues when he doesn't understand the joke. Authority figures are also dangerously ineffective. The police are initially not worried when girls are reported missing and they brush off the sorority's complaints about obscene phone calls. At this point in the narrative we already know a killer is targeting these girls, so the blasé attitude of the police seems destructive and incompetent. Sergeant Nash tells Jess that the killer is inside her house even though he is specifically told not to, which compels her to search for her friends and puts her in danger. She manages to survive long enough for the police to find her, but then the one authority figure who seemed capable, Lieutenant Fuller, condemns Jess to an off-screen death when he complacently accepts that Peter was the killer, despite a lack of real evidence, and leaves her alone in the house with Billy. This film leaves its audience questioning the legitimacy of those that have the most power in our society.

Halloween takes another approach and maintains the privileged position of patriarchal authority. Michael's doctor, Sam Loomis, is the wisest character in the story. He knows Michael is a monster and he can predict his behaviour. Laurie fights Michael and escapes him several times, proving her strength and determination, but at the end of the film she still has to be



saved by an authoritative male. Far from condemning her to death, Sam saves her life, and his knowing look at the disappearance of Michael's supposedly dead body is reassuring. In this film, the people who have power in society are the ones who deserve it, and they must retain this power so the innocent can be protected. *Halloween's* ending maintains the status quo, adopting a less radical political stance that is analogous to a more conservative American audience.

The ending of the original *Black Christmas* is left unresolved because we don't know what happens to Jess and we never learn about the origin or motivation of the killer. The POV camera in this film is not meant to align the audience with the killer, it ensures the killer remains enigmatic because he is never seen⁹. Bob Clark did invent a history for Billy, but it is only ambiguously alluded to in his phone calls. This history is never concrete because it is completely open to interpretation. The most obvious difference between the original *Black Christmas* and its American remake is that Billy's history is a major component of the newer film, and his identity is clearly established from the outset. Watching the remake after the original, it feels as if the newer film is directly answering the questions that the older version left open. The remake does not hide Billy's body; here we see Billy-the-murderer, as well as Billy-the-innocent-child. We witness his transformation from a helpless infant to a destructive psychopath and are invited to believe he is a victim of circumstance. The ending of this film is also completely resolved; both killers, Billy and Agnes, are unambiguously dead, and the Final Girl, Kelli, is definitely safe. In contrast with the Canadian version, here the viewer is reassured by the ultimate success of the protagonist and by an understandable villain who suffers an appropriate fate.

The mainstream Hollywood slasher film was inspired by the success of the independently-produced *Halloween*, which in turn was influenced by the under-acknowledged Canadian film *Black Christmas*. This means that *Black Christmas* is at least partially responsible for instigating the slasher genre, a part of cinema that is still a major part of Hollywood film. American cinema uses *Black Christmas's* conventions to reflect itself in a way that does not distort these conventions. If an American sensibility can be reflected using the generic prototype offered by a Canadian film, then the conventions established in one national cinema can easily transfer to another; these conventions are not inherently nationalistic.

Jim Leach argues against using genre films in a national cinema because they are too closely associated with Hollywood¹⁰. He says to be truly Canadian, a film must reject the hegemony of Hollywood through direct avoidance or subversion of generic conventions, ensuring that the viewer does not read a Canadian film as a pale imitation of an American product¹¹. *Black Christmas* challenges this assumption because the conventions of the American slasher began with a Canadian film; this film did not assimilate to an American tradition because that tradition had not yet been established. If a slasher film produced before 1978 is not reducing itself to American cinema, then a Canadian slasher produced after 1978 is not assimilating to an American tradition either; when deciding if a film is "Canadian" or not, the year it was produced shouldn't matter.

Due to the problematic origins of the slasher, a Canadian film like *Prom Night* (1980) can be seen in two different ways;

either it is cashing in on the American success of a film like *Halloween*, or it is reclaiming part of Canada's cinematic heritage. This particular film reveals the incestuous nature of North American popular culture. It is a Canadian film released shortly after *Halloween*, featuring the star of *Halloween*, Jamie Lee Curtis, and its Hollywood remake came out in 2008. In this situation it is difficult to determine which national cinema is appropriating what. Genre films are intrinsically derivative and repetitive¹² so it makes sense that the influence between Canadian and American slashers could work both ways. That a small Canadian production led to an enduring film genre means Canadian cinema is not completely powerless when it comes to Hollywood, and Canadian cinema does not have to imitate American film to be successful.

At first glance *Black Christmas* is not explicitly Canadian. It is directed by an American, and its setting is purposefully ambiguous, loosely determined by a random American flag in the background of one or two scenes. While representing Canada is not this film's primary objective, it does communicate a Canadian sensibility and it connects with Canadian audiences. In contrast to American slashers, *Black Christmas* is socially progressive and critical of society's dominant forces. This film used the resources available to the Canadian film industry to create a cinematic institution. Hollywood quickly incorporated *Black Christmas's* unique innovations into its own national cinema, and while these slashers are more widely acknowledged, there is nothing inherently American about the slasher or its conventions. This is clearly seen in the differences between *Black Christmas*, its American contemporary *Halloween*, and its modern American remake. These three films are all firmly located in the slasher genre, but they speak to the concerns of different national audiences. *Black Christmas* shows that Canadian film does not just exist on the margins of mainstream cinema, and genre films do not have to be off-limits to a filmmaker who wishes to express a specifically Canadian identity.

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NOTES

- 1 Worland, Rick. "A Short History of the Horror Film: 1945 to the Present." *The Horror Film: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 104-105.
- 2 Clover, Carol. "Her Body, Himself." *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. 35.
- 3 Hutchings, Peter. "Slashers and Post Slashers." *The Horror Film*. Essex, UK: Pearson Education, 2004. 193.
- 4 "The 12 Days of Black Christmas." *Black Christmas (Special Edition)*. Dir. Dan Duffin. Perf. Olivia Hussey, Margot Kidder, John Saxon. 2006. DVD. Somerville House, 2006.
- 5 Clover, "Her Body, Himself," 39
- 6 Hutchings, "Slashers," 193
- 7 Eberwien, Robert. "Remakes and Cultural Studies." *Play it Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*. Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal, eds. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998. 20.
- 8 "What Have You Done? (The Remaking of Black Christmas)." *Black Christmas (Unrated Widescreen Edition)*. Dir. Julie Ng. Perf. Glen Morgan, Bob Clark, Katie Cassidy. 2006. Dimension Films, 2007.
- 9 "The 12 Days of Black Christmas."
- 10 Leach, Jim. "Are Genres American?" *Film in Canada*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2006. 50.
- 11 Harris, Kenneth Marc. "American Film Genres and Non-American Films: A Case Study of *Utu*." *Cinema Journal* 29.2 (Winter 1990): 36-59. JSTOR 29 March 2008 <<http://www.jstor.com/search>>. 36.
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What's So Funny About CLASS STRUGGLE?

IDEOLOGY IN *THE TROTSKY*

By MATTHEW FLISFEDER

There are at least two ways in which a text may be inscribed with ideology. One is by raising a non-problem to the level of a true problem. Racism, for example, displaces discontent with the system of economic exploitation onto the figure of the 'intruder' (such as 'illegal immigrants') who is perceived as 'disrupting' the system. The other is the ahistorical presentation of a problem. Here, I am referring to History in the Marxian sense, i.e., historical materialism. Ironically, Jacob Tierney's *The Trotsky* (2009) is guilty of both kinds of ideological distortion: it raises a non-problem, or a false problem, to the level of a true problem, while at the same time ahistorically representing the latter. Although this film appears to side with the Left in its overt allegiance to Marxism (via Trotsky), it is, I claim, a most conservative rendering of Marxian politics, one that verges on parody.

The film tells the story of Leon Bronstein (Trotsky's given name at birth was Lev Bronstein), a seventeen-year-old Montreal high school student who believes that he is the reincarnation of the Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Red Army. Leon is determined to relive the life of Trotsky by battling against 'fascists'. In the opening scene of the film, Leon is shown leading a strike at his father's garment factory, where he has organized the workers into a 'union'. He has convinced the workers that they need to go on strike in order to assert their rights as a workers union against the warehouse owner, Leon's father, David. Frustrated with Leon, David takes it upon himself to learn about the life of Trotsky, his son's hero. He soon discovers that, unlike his son Leon, who attends a prestigious boarding school, Trotsky actually attended a public school. As punishment for his acts, David decides to send Leon to a west-end Montreal high school.

At his new high school, Leon quickly notices a lack of student organization in the face of the administrative 'fascist' controlling the school, i.e., the school principal. Leon is then determined to organize the students into a union, thus proving that the younger generation is not apathetic, but merely bored—a recurrent theme throughout the film.

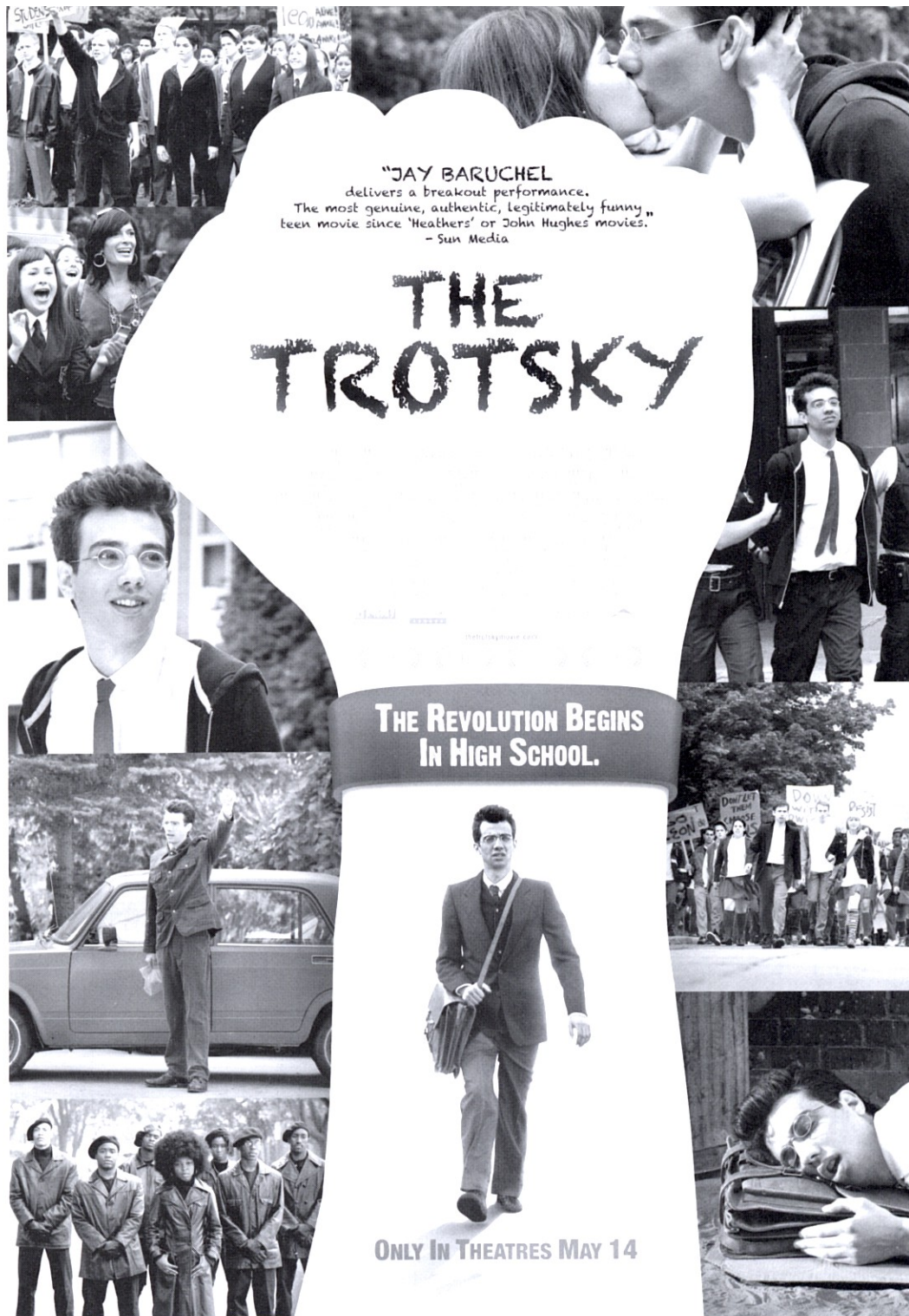
Although the film presents Leon as a noble hero, there are some questionable elements in the film, at least from a Marxian perspective. Most apparent is the aforementioned elevation of a non-problem into a real problem—that is, the organization of students into a union in order to battle against the 'fascist'

school administrators. Leon's effort to organize the students into a union is not so troublesome. What is problematic is the Autotelic nature of this organization. Leon's political project is rather loosely based on an ideal of "union for union's sake," whereby 'union' seems to occupy the position of a transcendental signified, in Derridean terms, that informs *The Trotsky's* political ontology.

A close reading of this film indicates that Leon's entire problem with authority centres on an Oedipal conflict. His antagonistic approach to authority is a mere displacement of his disdain for paternal authority. At the same time, Leon maintains a certain perverse attachment to the paternal authority, which he displaces onto authority in general. Leon's struggle with authority generates a certain form of enjoyment (what the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, referred to as *jouissance*) that he is not ready to give up because it preserves a perverse pleasure.

Initially, the Oedipal narrative takes the classic form of the male child's contempt for his father. At the beginning of the film, Leon appears to be more interested in challenging his father's authority than in starting a revolution. This is confirmed by Leon's recurring nightmare, perhaps the most creative scene in the entire film. The nightmare sequence references the famous Odessa steps sequence from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), one of the most referenced scenes in the entire history of cinema (parodied, for example, in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987)). In the dream sequence, Leon imagines himself as the baby in the carriage, rolling down the Odessa steps. During the first occurrence of the dream sequence, David Bronstein is presented in the guise of a tsarist soldier shooting at Leon's stepmother, Anne Bronstein, as the carriage rolls down the steps.... A Freudian could not ask for a better 'master text' with which to decipher this film.

Slavoj Žižek argues that the Oedipalization of politics in cinema is one way in which the political content of a film may be subverted by the reigning ideology, through a filtration of history in favour of the family or romantic narrative. Other examples include James Cameron's films *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009). In these films, the political problem is subordinated to the problem of the couple. *Titanic*, according to Žižek, is an example of a film that subordinates the political class struggle to the romantic love between the two protagonists. This,



according to him, is why Jack must die at the end of the film: the romance is preserved, thus displacing the class struggle—one of the apparent themes in the film. Were Jack to survive, Zizek argues, the class antagonism between the two would surely tear them apart, thus ending the potential for romance.¹ *Avatar*, similarly, displaces the political problem of colonialism and imperialism onto the love narrative between the two protagonists. A true test of the ideological weight of a film such as this, according to Zizek, is to read it in relation to real life events. Around the same time as this film was released, areas of land in the Indian state of Orissa, which is inhabited by the Kondh tribe, were being sold to mining companies. Unlike the

film, however, Zizek notes that, "in Orissa there are no noble princesses waiting for the white [American] hero to seduce them and help save their people."² Zizek's examples, here, help to articulate the point I am trying to make regarding the ahistorical presentation of a problem. From a Marxian-psychoanalytic perspective, the Oedipal narrative is one way of filtering out history from a political problem. The historical specificity of the situation is replaced by the dilemma of reconstituting the family structure.... Back to the *Trotsky*.

The dream sequence is repeated later on in the film, only this time the figure of the guard and the mother are replaced by Frank, a law professor at McGill University whom Leon has



contacted to defend him against the myriad of fascists, and Alexandra, Leon's love interest and one of Frank's graduate students. Leon meets Alexandra when he follows Frank to his home, trying to convince him to be his lawyer. At a certain point in the film, Leon comes to blame Frank for undermining his attempts to woo Alexandra. Thus, in Leon's dream, Frank is transposed into the authority figure of the soldier, while Alexandra becomes the figure of desire, thus replacing the earlier reference to the (step-) mother.

Leon clearly represses this Oedipal aspect of his identity and displaces his anger onto the 'fascist' administration at his new high school. During the first day at his new school, Leon inquisitively follows a miserly teacher, Mrs. Danvers, around the halls as she hands out detention slips to students for very minor infractions, such as having dirty shoes, or untucked shirts, or for having body piercings. After witnessing the parsimonious acts of Mrs. Danvers, there is a close-up on Leon who, with a grin, slowly, and excitedly proclaims: "Faaaassssccciisssttt!" Leon's facial expression demonstrates perfectly the kind of perverse excitement he gets from finding 'fascists' with whom he can battle. The mere fact that Leon appears to take some kind of pleasure from his struggle with 'fascists' is a key indication that this film is, perhaps, not truly about politics—at least, not in the Marxian sense.

Aside from references to Terry Eagleton and Ken Loach, and of course the references to Trotsky himself, there is nothing particularly Marxian about *The Trotsky*. The opening scene, where Leon tries to unionize the workers in his father's warehouse, is the first example of a missed opportunity in this film. Despite this representation of workers' struggle, the film makes no reference to the political class struggle at the core of the capitalist mode of production. What we get, instead, is a 'Coles Notes' version of Marxism for the most likely teenage audience, which posits the organization of a workers' union as the sole task of politics on the Left. The problem, again, is that there is an important historical element to the political that is missing in this incarnation of 'Trotsky'. Without any regards for the latter, Leon Bronstein seems to be nothing more than a rebellious upper-middle class boy struggling to 'find himself'. At a certain

level, the film seems to be the story of a teen boy mulling over his own identity politics. 'Trotsky' then becomes the persona assumed by Leon in his struggle with paternal authority.

Further evidence shows that this film has very little to do with politics in the Marxian, or even in the Trotskyist sense, and is based upon some *ad hoc* popular (mis-) conception of Leftist politics. When Leon decides that the students need to unionize, there is very little political motivation provided other than the fact that the administrators are 'fascists' and that 'school sucks'. I defy anyone to find me a teenager who does not think that 'school sucks'. Leon's 'revolution' is closer to resembling a brand of 'authoritarian populism' that organizes disparate groups of ineffectual youths by locating their common disdain for a particular 'enemy'—Principal Berkhoff. Is *this* not the very definition of *fascism*? In many ways, the same film could have been released under the title, *The Hitler*, with a few minor details amended to resemble the life of the 'führer'. One can imagine, though, what such a film would look like, today. It would not be a romantic comedy, but rather a thriller, perhaps similar to Bryan Singer's adaptation of Stephen King's *Apt Pupil* (1998), or perhaps a dramatic film like Tony Kaye's *American History X* (1998). There is something about the form of the comedy that displaces the contemporary relevance of Marxian theory and politics, what Fredric Jameson refers to as the 'ideology of form'—it is the form of comedy that carries a particular ideological message.³ It is almost as if the full presentation of Trotsky as a loveable, comedic character is a way of disavowing his importance today. This is keeping in line with other relatively recent films presenting a certain kind of nostalgia for pre-1990s Communism (after which we all, according to Francis Fukuyama, experienced the 'end of history'),⁴ such as Ulrich Beckers's *Goodbye Lenin* (2003). Communism, it would seem, is, after the 'end of history', apparently something to laugh about.

The divergence between representations of 'fascism' and 'communism' in post-Communist era cinema is indicative of how the reigning ideology mediates between these two ('evil') alternatives to liberal democracy. Fascism, on the one hand, still counts as something horrible, and is therefore mostly represented



The Trotsky

through genres such as drama or thriller. On the other hand, what can we infer from the comic portrayal of 'communism'? It is as if taking 'communism' seriously begins to reveal too much, which the reigning ideology would rather not address. The only way to fully negate it is by presenting it as something ridiculous and nonsensical.

We should keep in mind that this film was released against the background of what many commentators have referred to as the worst financial crisis since the market crash of 1929. Instead of an historical-political analysis of capitalism, what we get in the popular media are the all too easy displacements of class struggle onto 'enemy figures', such as 'illegal immigrants', or the 'greedy' who wanted too much and caused a 'rupture' in the system (Oliver Stone's recent sequel to his 1987 hit, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), moves in the direction of putting blame upon the latter),⁵ or even so-called Socialists, such as Barack Obama, a favourite target of the growing Tea-Party movement in the United States, who is often blamed for causing the financial crisis because of initiatives such as healthcare reform.... The list goes on, *ad absurdum*, avoiding all investigations into the system of economic exploitation itself, displacing problems with the latter onto some external, contingent element, and up to, in *The Trotsky*, the very archetypal figure of the rival in high school melodrama: the school principal. Following in the footsteps of 80s classics, such as John Hughes' films *The Breakfast Club* (1986) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), the figure of the 'fascist'-enemy principal is, here, easily recognizable.

One could argue that the school and the principle are examples of what Louis Althusser referred to as 'Ideological State Apparatuses';⁶ however, in order to do so, one would need to make the connection between education and the ideology of the state, which rules in favour of the capitalist class. This is nowhere found in *The Trotsky*, and here we find a second example of a missed opportunity in this film.

In the end, would it not have been truly utopian if the students organized with the workers in David Bronstein's warehouse, making connections between the state apparatus, the educational apparatus, and the class struggle, thus not only

proving that they are *not* apathetic, but that they are cognizant of real-world politics—perhaps even taking on the form of the Leninist party (the union of intellectuals and workers)? This of course could never happen in this film, which is more of an Oedipal narrative than a Marxian one. Such a protest would not have allowed Leon to reconcile with his father at the end of the film. Politics, in other words, are evacuated in order to save the family relationship. *The Trotsky*, far from being a much-needed political film, one that actually could interpellate real life students towards the politics of our time, is much more of a family comedy. One should view this film not as a tribute to Marxism, or Trotsky, but rather as a family narrative that pathetically endeavours to present something apolitical as *the* political *par excellence*. In order to save the comic effect of the film the political is relegated to the position of the unconscious. There is, after all, nothing funny or entertaining about the class struggle.

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NOTES

- 1 Slavoj Žižek. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London and New York: Verso, 2008. 57-58.
- 2 Slavoj Žižek. *Living in the End Times*. London and New York: Verso, 2010. 394-395.
- 3 Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1981.
- 4 Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Free Press, 1992.
- 5 Stone's other recent film, the documentary, *South of the Border* (2010), is much more inspiring for the Left.
- 6 Louis Althusser. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2010



by ROBERT K. LIGHTNING

With no controversial entrees like last year's *Antichrist* or *Inglourious Basterds* or (to my knowledge) critically-acclaimed debuts like Xavier Dolan's *J'ai Tué Ma Mère*, there seemed few if any 'must sees' at this year's Cannes Film Festival, making my experience this year an entirely less intense affair. Even the low point of my festival viewing, Stephen Frears' pedestrian sexual roundabout *Tamara Drewe*, offended only in being no more than what it was intended to be: an innocuous bourgeois entertainment, not actively offensive but a disappointment in a festival setting.

Among the festival's high points was the timely screening of the documentary *Cleveland Versus Wall Street*, a Swiss-French co-production that stages a mock trial that seeks to indict Wall Street banks for the decimation (financial and otherwise) of the city of Cleveland, Ohio. Bringing together a cross-section of contemporary American capitalist society (including homeowners, a former drug dealer, a Tea Partyer, and a former advisor to Ronald Reagan) the film documents Cleveland lawyer Josh Cohen's attempt to prove the local affect of the banking decisions that led to the recent market collapse. If for no other reason the film is remarkable for demonstrating the shared capitalist psychology

(rooted in the ideology of 'personal responsibility') that links a free market ideologue to a homeowner facing foreclosure, a psychology that dictates the latter's self-condemnation and admission of guilt when under cross examination—even when it is he who is so clearly a victim (of predatory lending).

Although inspired by the most recent of global financial crises, *Cleveland* also provides a diagrammatic description of the perpetual exigencies of capitalism and demands to be read in the proper political and historical context, a reading I cannot provide at this time. Similarly, the Godardian aesthetic being in question, I cannot at this time provide a reading of *Film Socialisme*, more than one viewing of Godard being required for even a provisional assessment. Finally, as it attempts to actualize democratic principle in its central romance, I am developing for future publication an essay on Doug Liman's political thriller *Fair Game* that views it in relation to the Classical Hollywood tradition of the democratic couple.

Note to readers and filmmakers: I apologize in advance for any errors in the following readings, based as they are upon a single viewing in the heightened atmosphere of a festival. I issue here also a general spoiler alert.

Blue Valentine (Derek Cianfrance, USA) belongs to that film genre where a marriage, on the brink of dissolution, is examined in flashback, the film making the case for the union's continuance. (Steven's *Penny Serenade* and Cukor's *The Marrying Kind* come immediately to mind). But for its refusal of the conciliatory ending, *Blue Valentine* adds nothing radically new to the genre, its primary appeal (as is often the case) is its providing a showcase for two talented performers, here Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams.

The film also provides instances of felicitous direction as when a close shot of Gosling (in flashback) at the moment he first sees Williams, his face seeming to anticipate disapproval, is answered by a direct cut to a close shot of the seemingly disapproving Williams (in the present day), the editing suggesting (as husband and wife appear to face each other across time) their incompatibility from their first meeting. Given the generic requirement to dramatize the extreme fragility of the institution of marriage (as well as its fragile resilience) the film's non-traditional response to the question of whether the marriage will survive or not seems arbitrary and one suspects that the Cukor film would have come to an identical end had such been allowed in 1952.

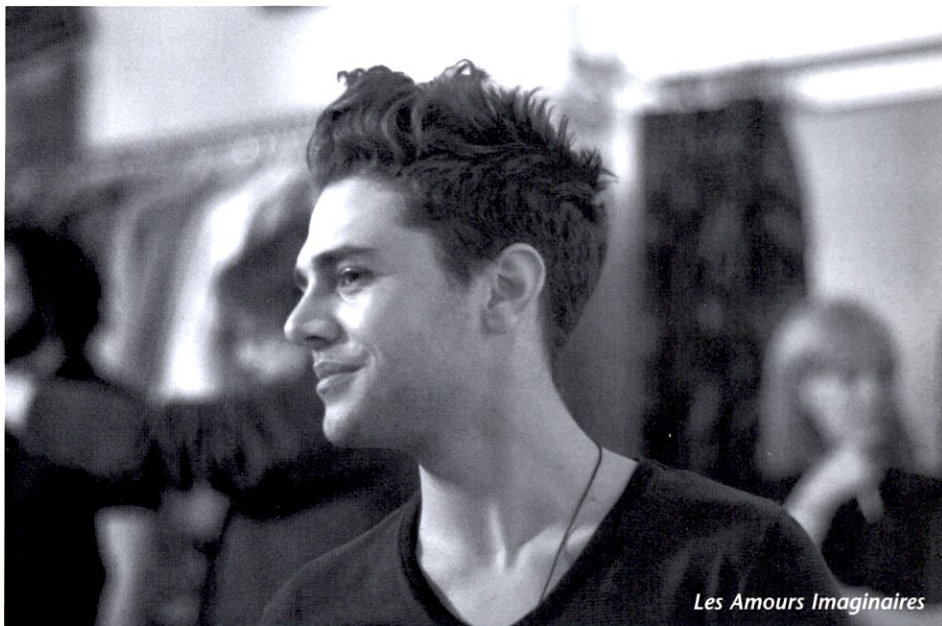
After his fine, first feature *J'ai Tué Ma Mère* (focus of a sensational Cannes debut in 2009) **Les Amours Imaginaires** (Xavier Dolan, Quebec) finds its director in a relatively relaxed mood. If a comparative *divertissement*, *Les Amours* (like Dolan's first film) displays both Dolan's imagination and mature command of the medium, placing it leagues ahead of the other two Canadian films I saw at Cannes. **Zed Crew** (Noah Pink, Halifax) was a flatly directed if sincere comic account of a Zambian hip-hop crew's plot to stow away to America, its underdeveloped narrative leading to an anticlimactic conclusion. **TutuMUCH** (Elise Swerhone, Manitoba) was an extremely conventional documentary (about young ballet dancers in training) made compelling simply by the drama of individual stories rather than the tale's telling. At only twenty-one, Dolan's talents seemed even more precocious when compared to both.

Les Amours examines two narcissistic personalities whose psychic drives are analogous to (and in the film assimilated to) those conventions of romantic love best illustrated by the lover's demand of complete reciprocity of feeling: I love you, love me identically in return. Best friends Francis (Dolan himself) and Marie (Monia Chokri) both fall for the beautiful and (apparently) guileless and innocent Nicolas (Niels Schneider), an inappropriate love object for two self-consciously sophisticated urbanites but one who promises, once entranced, to return love all the more intensely for his deficient sophistication. Despite the growing evidence throughout the film of Nicolas' insensitivity, even mean-spiritedness, the friends, fueled by competition, surrender to masochistic self-reinvention in their efforts to engage his interest. (She becomes 'Audrey Hepburn', he 'James Dean').

The film's central premise of an escalating competition coex-

isting with an obsessive love, though seemingly contradictory (the romantic lover's fixation upon the love object would seem to disallow a diversion of psychic energies into competition) is ultimately illuminating, the lovers' egotism providing the point at which the two apparently diverse psychic paths meet. Thus the transformation of friendship into competition underlines the narcissism theme: winning the competition becomes more important than winning Nicolas. A series of bedroom scenes where Francis and Marie interact with other lovers further suggests the egotism that ardency masks: Although each encounter ends in lovemaking, so self-absorbed are Francis and Marie in each encounter that the lover's presence is nearly negated.

When Nicolas (with unambiguous finality) blocks their nar-

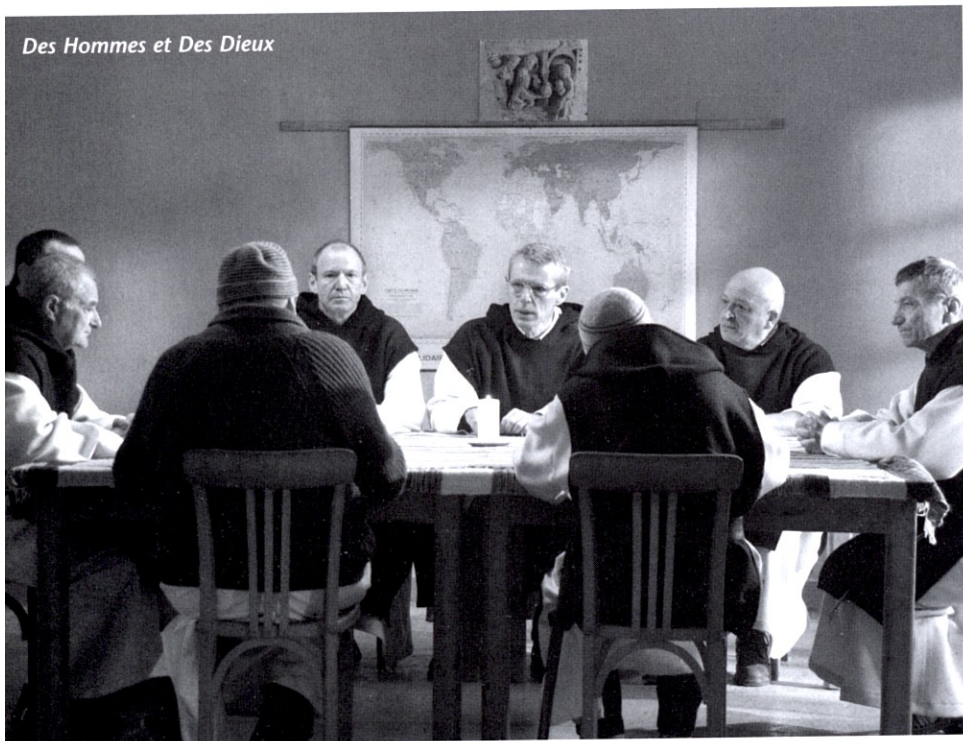


Les Amours Imaginaires

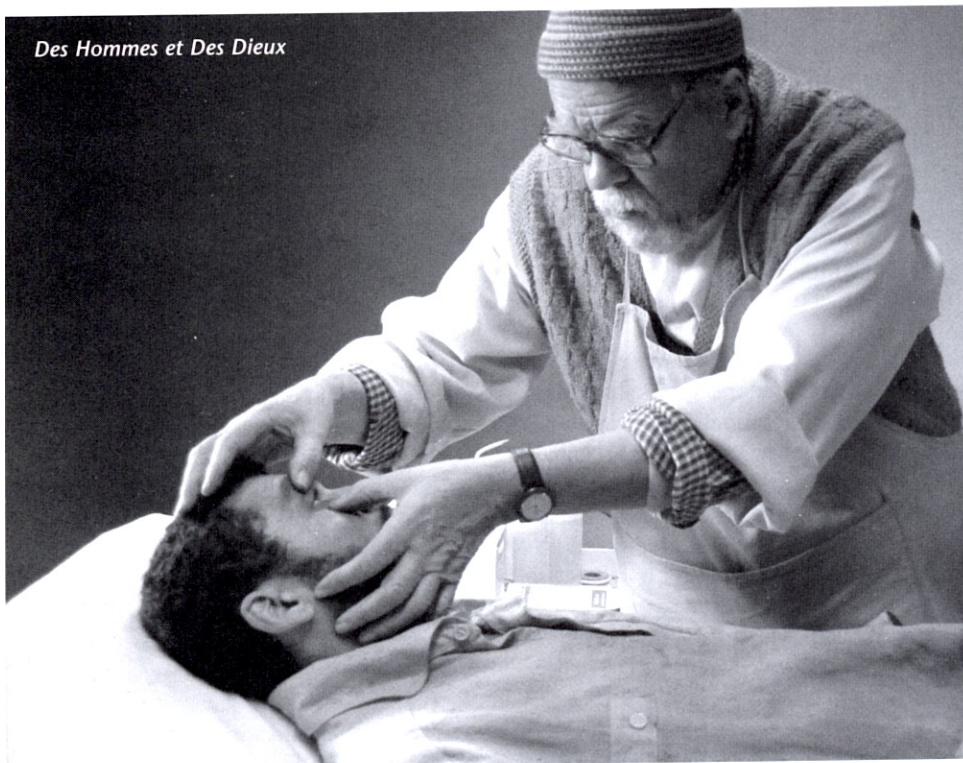
cissistic drives, Francis' and Marie's overinvestment in him, uncompensated, leads to a period of self contempt and self-denunciation. Surprisingly deep feelings of despair ensue (touchingly conveyed by both actors) completely unmerited by the loss of the particular object in question but suggesting that (per Alfred Adler) *a priori* feelings of inferiority were the source of the narcissistic drives, feelings now further aggravated by the loss. When 'love' of Nicolas eventually turns to *contempt* for him this further confirms that he was merely the object of psychic drives that preceded his appearance rather than the impetus for them. (Nicolas himself remains a mystery throughout but he is possibly the most self-involved of the three: His own mother (Anne Dorval) describes him as "spoiled"—even as she spoils him. Simultaneously inciting desire while frustrating its fulfillment, his contradiction of *every* assumption made by Marie and Francis while pursuing him suggests possible deliberation on his part. When the competition for him eventually redirects attention from him, he abandons the two friends abruptly with a comment that ambiguously suggests his own narcissism: "Love me or leave me").

All of which might suggest that *Les Amours* is a sober case study rather than the entertaining light comedy that it is. If less rigorously developed than Dolan's first film it is nonetheless additional confirmation of his talent.

Des Hommes et Des Dieux



Des Hommes et Des Dieux



Des Hommes et Des Dieux (Xavier Beauvois, France, winner Grand Prix) recounts the events leading up to the still unsolved deaths of seven French nationals—Trappist monks based in Algeria during the Algerian Civil War—at the hands of either the Algerian military or opposing Islamic fundamentalist insurgents. Considering the political situation into which the monks were plunged, their presence in the region a thorn-in-the-side to both the military and the insurgents (indistinguishable in the film in their mutual deployment of murder and torture), one would not be surprised that a filmmaker would incline conservatively toward (though, hopefully, resist) rendering the monks saintly in their commitment to both monastic life and the local Muslim community they would serve until their deaths. That French filmmaker Beauvois eventually succumbs to this tendency, the reader has already doubtless discerned although he initially counters it by cunningly emphasizing the monks' humanness, focusing specifically on their frankly-expressed fears (or, in the case of Michael Lonsdale's Brother Luc, his earthiness) as well as their fluctuating resolve to remain in the region. Nonetheless the pristine natural environment surrounding the monastery (beautifully photographed) is an early indicator of the direction the film will eventually take, the visual rhetoric of placidly imposing mountains, majestic clouds against blue skies, and verdant gardens effectively locating the monks 'nearer to God' both in their daily toils and in their foretold deaths.

Once the monks have all resolved to remain (some had temporarily abandoned monastic life), the sanctification project is fully engaged and its hazards become obvious. In a meal celebrating their reunion (the last of several such gatherings depicted, the echoes of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* now unavoidable) the worldly pleasures of wine and music are indulged. The choice of *Swan Lake* as accompaniment (the familiar music that opens and closes act two) is telling, the monks' restored commitment to one another and to community in the face of what the audience knows will be their fate finding expression in the ballet's themes of both fated love and commitment triumphing over death. Under the influence of the doom-laden music (familiar also for its use by Todd Browning behind the opening credits of *Dracula*), the monks become increasingly dejected and tearful as they too anticipate their possible fate. Beauvois chooses to shoot this scene by returning over and over to the increasingly

despondent faces of individual monks, relentlessly focusing upon their pain. The sanctification project (as realized here) is not unlike that found in many Classical renderings of Christian martyrdom, the conventional focus in these works upon the martyr's death agonies (Christ and Saint Sebastian have been prime subjects) tending to fetishize pain and suffering.

A similar purpose is served by the indulgence of pain in the representation of martyrdom in Classical art and in *Des Hommes*. If in the former it allows for the release of repressed sexual feelings commonly held by both artist and viewer (the convention of the martyr's near nakedness makes the point) in the latter it allows for the release of the animus the film so clearly feels toward the monks' tormenters and from which it chooses to disassociate the monks so completely. (All criticism of the military and the fundamentalists is voiced by other Algerians). In doing so the film allows the viewer to indulge in easy feelings of superiority toward the monks' oppressors. We are very far here from such exceptional depictions of benevolence or faith-challenged as Michelangelo's *Pieta* (which, by unconventionally deemphasizing Christ's face, encourages the viewer to explore Mary's all too human response) or, for that matter, Zinnemann's *The Nun's Story* which, even in the sequence depicting the killing of a European nun by a Congo native, never forgets the human frailty shared by the sisterhood and the African community it serves.

Centered on a fine performance by veteran Korean actress Yun Junghee, *Poetry* (Lee Changdong, South Korea, winner Best Screenplay) is the story of the feminist awakening of an aging woman who is also in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Part-time home attendant to an aged male stroke victim and full-time caretaker to her adolescent grandson, Mija's (Yun) work and home lives seem dominated by the care of self-centered males. Searching for meaning in her life (the search intensified by the anticipated loss of cognition), she counters its drab monotony with a resilient cheerfulness and with her belief in the redeeming qualities of 'beauty', expressed in both her wardrobe (which is in self-consciously striking contrast to the drabness of her work and home activities) and in her commitment (when she takes an adult education class) to the beauty of poetry.

Her faith in beauty is challenged by a local crime with which she becomes obsessed: After months of repeated rapes by a group of male classmates, a high school girl drowns herself. Discovering that her grandson was one of the girls' tormenters further challenges her faith in the potential saving power of beauty. But it also provides an unforeseen opportunity to discover meaning in a challenge to patriarchy. Director Lee Changdong develops his theme of the necessity for women to disturb the patriarchal order (and patriarchal male complacency in particular) primarily through Mija's gradual political awakening but he already hints at it in the film's opening scene: A boys' game on the river bank is interrupted by the discovery of the girl's body floating in the river.

Patriarchal male privilege crystallizes in the efforts of a group of business men—fathers of the boys involved—to raise funds as barter to discourage the girl's uneducated and impoverished mother from pressing charges. The masculine control of capital guarantees male social power, its ability to intimidate and seduce fully realized when representatives of the media, law enforcement, the school and eventually the girl's mother com-

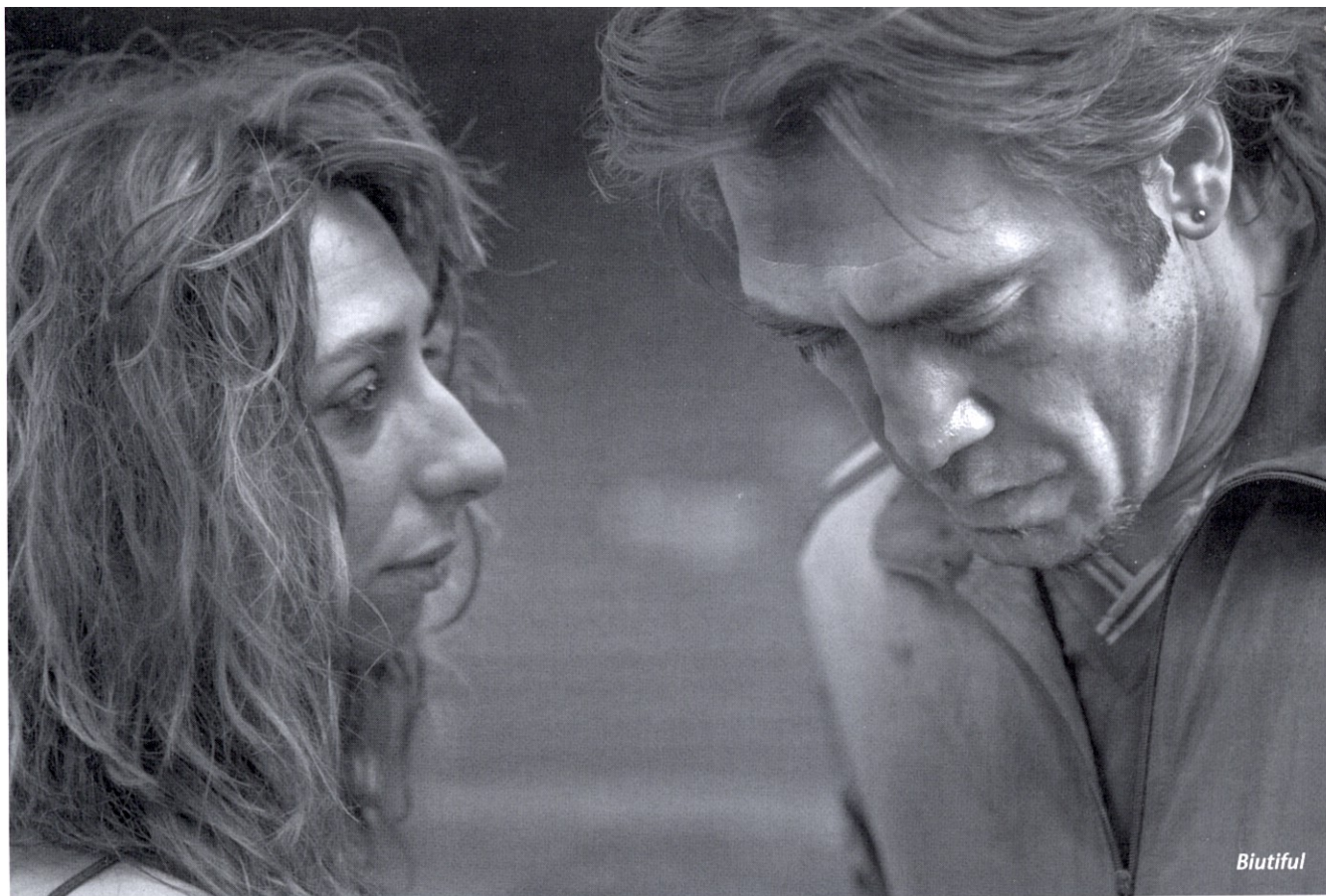
ply with their efforts to suppress the story. Both financially-challenged herself and the only female custodian of one of the boys (and thus having more in common with the dead girl's mother than these men) a reluctant Mija is enlisted in their efforts.

As she discovers that her wishes are considered secondary by the various men in her life to their own and that she is essentially a non-entity to them outside of her caretaking duties, Mija's fascination with the dead girl's story becomes *identification* and this feeds an increasingly active challenge to male complacency. Entrusted by the men with the crucial task of visiting the girl's home to gain the mother's confidence (they feel as a woman she will be more successful than a man) she finds after meeting the woman that she can't complete her objective and departs. Pilfering a photo of the girl when she attends her funeral, Mija plants it conspicuously in her home to draw a reaction (unsuccessfully) from her grandson. And when she complies with the sexual wishes of her client out of apparent empathy (he wants to feel "like a man" just once more) she later blackmails this revered patriarch for his transgression to secure her portion of the hush money, appropriately using one self-interested male to solve the financial problem created by another.

If her exploitation by men provides the negative impetus for Mija to change her life, the poetry class is its positive corollary. A typical class exercise meant to stimulate creativity has the effect on Mija of reacquainting her with long-lost feelings of female camaraderie and nurturing (through memories of her grandmother and sister) that induce positive feelings that, while expressed in aesthetic terms ("I felt pretty"), have nothing to do with aesthetics. However it is in the collusion of aesthetics and politics that Mija eventually finds meaning. (And therein the viewer can certainly read an artistic testament). Required to produce a poem to complete the course, Mija experiences writer's block. It is only after she takes decisive action to rectify the girl's death (through an act that defeats patriarchy at its core) that she is able to produce the poem that we hear read in voice-over at the conclusion.

As she remains essentially a product of patriarchy, Mija's singular act of political radicalism demands a singular tragic act of compensation and the film ends with her mysterious disappearance. If I have any reservations about the film, certainly one of the most satisfying I viewed at Cannes, it is to its deployment of masculine heroics in the narrative. A blunt ex-cop whom Mija encounters at various poetry readings (offending Mija's sense of decorum as well as beauty, he invests these occasions with scatological humor) becomes the model for Mija's own rebellion against patriarchy: He lost his position when he revealed the corruption of his department. His brave challenge to authority of course makes him the loner hero so valued in masculine culture, the value of such a position determined partly by the sacrifice involved. There is no equivalent cultural role for women, whose heroism is likely to be misinterpreted or go unnoticed—that is unless it is invested with tragedy, a culturally-determined prerequisite to female heroism possibly fulfilled at the conclusion of *Poetry*.

A showcase for its male star Javier Bardem (Best Actor), *Biutiful* (Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, Mexico/Spain) is full of narrative inconsistencies and contradictions held together by a single-minded determination to valorize its hero. Uxbal (Bardem) is a smalltime hood situated socially between



Barcelona's underground business community and the illegal-immigrant labor force he procures for it (primarily from Africa and China). He is also a family man, married to a bipolar and substance-abusing wife, raising their two children primarily on his own. Dying of cancer, he hopes both to secure his children's financial future and to redeem a paternal legacy of heroism. (Having defied Franco, his father died as the result of an illness acquired when he escaped to Mexico).

The value of family is primary in the film: Uxbal's commitment to both his family and those of his workers is his one unambiguous virtue, distinguishing him decisively from the 'bad' capitalists that pepper the film. Thus the film condemns a Chinese sweatshop owner not only for his exploitation of immigrant labor (the workers as well as their children live *in perpetuum* in the sweatshop, both their workplace and impromptu home) but also for betraying his family with a love affair. (His seductive male lover proves the film's ultimate villain when he arranges for the mass disposal in the sea of workers killed in a workplace accident. As both home-wrecker and ruthless businessman, he is of course the film's moral antithesis to Uxbal. We can charitably assume that it is only a coincidence that he is also gay). Conversely, when the wife of an African worker betrays Uxbal and his children and steals money from them, the film seemingly refuses to condemn her because she uses the money so that she and her baby can rejoin her husband. The hegemony of family gives even the film's valorization of Uxbal's father a critical edge: After all, the course of Uxbal's life was largely determined by the critical rupture of family created by his father's activism.

Iñárritu clearly conceived Uxbal as a flawed existential hero trying to survive in a corrupt world and to that end, through both red herrings and mixed messages, he allows the film to

blatantly contradict itself. The film's conception of Uxbal's wife, Marambra (Maricel Alvarez) is exemplary. Introduced as an amoral vamp (unclothed, she gives a sensual massage to Uxbal's equally unclothed brother) the film promptly demands a more liberal assessment from the viewer when she firmly rebuffs an overture from him. Childlike but loving (beloved by her children, she is gentle and playful with her son in contrast to the over-exacting Uxbal) she seems initially the victim of Uxbal's paternalistic attitude toward *her*. However, later in the film after the family has been reunited and Uxbal recommits to the marital relationship, she proves not only unreliable but dangerous when she spirits her daughter away on an adventure, while leaving the younger son (whom Marambra had earlier seemed to favor) for several days alone in their home. (Uxbal is in jail at the time). Just in case we miss the point that we are to now assess her as villainous (or that we are now to condemn behavior that earlier we were seemingly encouraged to excuse), after having earlier rejected the brother's advances, it is now implied that her prior behavior was a betrayal of Uxbal and that brother and wife conspire in a moneymaking scheme involving disposal of the father's body. As she is bipolar, her dramatic behavioral changes are perhaps meant to be interpreted as deriving from her illness. Or perhaps Iñárritu, committed to a documentary-like psychological realism, is with her (and other characters) only revealing contradictory *aspects* of a complex personality. Given the series of betrayals that conspire by the conclusion to make of Uxbal a tragic figure, the answer might be much simpler: *Biutiful's* existential theme applies only to its straight, male hero.

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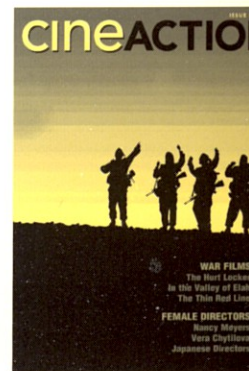
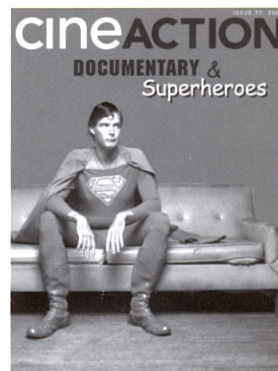
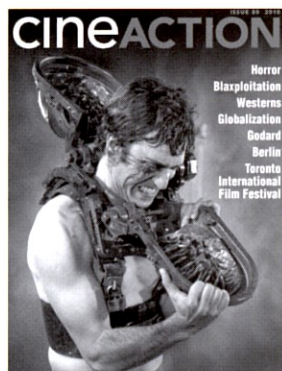
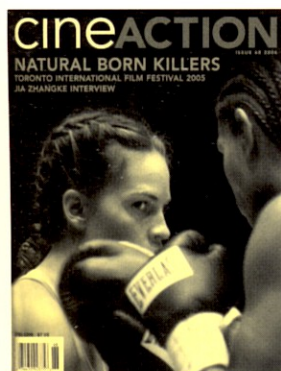
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- 16 Canadian Cinema
- 17 Re:Positioning
- 19/20 Critical Issues

- 21/22 Rethinking Authorship
- 28 Canadas: Cinema and Criticism
- 29 Revaluation: Hollywood
- 30 Framing the Family
- 31 Narrative and Film
- 34 Modernism
- 38 Murder in America
- 39 Contemporary World Cinemas
- 41 Style
- 42 Chinese Films
- 43 Films of the 90s
- 44 Performance
- 45 Canadian Cinema; Festivals
- 50 Hitchcock & Cukor
- 54 Screwball Comedy
- 55 Star Image Icon
- 56 Shifting Narratives
- 57 Film in Canada
- 58 World Cinema Since 1990
- 59 Max Ophuls Centenary

- 60 East Asian Cinemas
- 61 New Canadian Cinema
- 62 Close Readings
- 63 Minnelli and Ozu Centenary
- 65 Sex, Terror, Madness, Canada
- 66 Questions of Value
- 67 Film on Film
- 68 Natural Born Killers
- 69 Films From Around the Globe
- 70 Protest and Revolution
- 71 Sexuality in the Cinema
- 72 Film and Film Criticism Today
- 73/74 New Media
- 75 The Art House Film
- 76 International Cinema/Underrated Films
- 77 Documentary and Superheroes
- 78 Global Cinema/Canadian Films & TV
- 79 Collaboration
- 80 Global Cinema/Genre Films
- 81 War Films/Female Directors





Le Voyage dans la Lune, 1902

Avatar, 2009

